

Managing Crisis  
and Sustaining Peace  
between China and  
the United States

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## SUMMARY

A series of crises have strained relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States since the end of the Cold War. Included most prominently among them are the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the midair collision between a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter plane in 2001. Although none of these crises led to direct military hostilities, they have had an adverse impact on bilateral relations and portend future such crises between the two countries. To determine how best to mitigate such crises in the future, it is important to study these recent crises and identify the positive and negative responses and actions of both governments during them.

The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996, sparked by Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, led to the first face-off between Chinese and U.S. militaries since President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. Even so, transparency on the part of China, restraint on the part of the United States, and regular communication between Beijing and Washington during the crisis helped reduce anxieties and the possibility of misjudgment on either side, thus avoiding an escalation of the crisis.

The U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, which occurred in the midst of U.S.-led NATO air strikes against the former Yugoslavia, ignited strong and widespread demonstrations in China against the United States. The crisis was worsened by a slow and insufficient U.S. response to the incident, inadequate protection of U.S. diplomatic facilities in China, and a "conspiracy theory" adopted by Beijing about the bombing. Although the two governments ultimately moved beyond the incident, it took several months for both sides to bring bilateral ties back on track, and it left the Chinese with a long-term negative feeling toward the United States.

Compared with the Taiwan Strait and embassy bombing episodes in which reassurance and internal policymaking characterized events following the initial crisis, the EP-3 incident of 2001 featured bargaining between the two sides. In fact, it was the mismanagement of the incident that caused a diplomatic dilemma between China and the United States—and not the collision itself. Specifically, the deployment of three U.S. Navy destroyers in the South China Sea and President Bush's strong-worded public statement served only to aggravate the situation, as did China's delay in releasing the EP-3 crew. While positive steps taken by both sides ultimately helped lead to the resolution of the issue, the missteps taken by each side caused the escalation of the crisis and postponed its resolution.

A careful examination of these past crises reveals salient characteristics of both Chinese and U.S. crisis management, revealing commonality and distinctiveness in their respective practices. For example, on one hand, both sides tend to take steps to pressure for concessions during crisis, which only escalates crisis and heightens tensions. Additionally, both sides face the pressures of domestic politics during a crisis, thereby complicating the decision-making process of the two governments in resolving it. On the other hand, China emphasizes the preservation of sovereignty and national dignity in its approach to a crisis and places great significance on symbolic gestures, while the United States demonstrates a strong utilitarian tendency in responding to crisis and puts strong import on direct communication.

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By drawing lessons from these past crises and understanding the characteristics of Chinese and U.S. crisis-management styles, specific, tailor-made recommendations about how to avoid and manage various future crises between the two nations can be made. But whether a future crisis is over Taiwan, a military accident, the Korean peninsula, or even a Sino-Japanese clash in the East China Sea, both sides must begin now to enhance their dialogue over crisis management to get a better sense of each other's crisis management mechanism and to develop a capability to accurately interpret each other's crisis behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

An international crisis is commonly viewed as a sequence of interactions between the governments of two or more sovereign states in severe conflict, short of actual war, but involving the perception of a dangerously high probability of war.<sup>1</sup> One study suggests that an international crisis requires four conditions: a change in a nation's external or internal environment, a threat to basic values, a simultaneous or subsequent high probability of involvement in military hostilities, and recognition of a finite time for a response to the external threat.<sup>2</sup> While probable military conflict is a feature of many international crises, the likelihood of war is very low during others. To delineate this latter kind of crisis, Patrick James, a professor from the University of Southern California, introduced the concept of "near crisis"—a situation in which each involved actor perceives a threat to basic values and a finite time for response but not an increased probability of military hostilities.<sup>3</sup>

In the post–Cold War era, Sino-U.S. relations have undergone a number of serious crises, such as the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the midair collision between a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter plane in 2001. Although these three crises did not lead to military hostilities, they seriously strained and damaged bilateral ties in the short term and created a negative impact on relations between the two countries in the long term.

In the future, crises may arise from time to time between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States in the following areas. First, the future of Taiwan is still uncertain and remains a big source of contention between Beijing and Washington. Internal political developments in Taiwan may drive its leaders to cross the red line in cross-strait relations and cause a standoff between China and the United States, as in the past. Second, as China modernizes its army and gradually expands its military parameters, the United States will monitor more closely the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) activities, and some incidents may occur in the air or at sea. Third, the Korean peninsula remains a major risk factor in regional security, and some adverse developments could invite different reactions from Beijing and Washington, which may create tension and friction between the two countries. Finally, given the enhanced security ties between the United States and Japan, a Sino-Japanese clash over the East China Sea or the Diaoyu Islands may spill over into Sino-U.S. relations.

To better deal with future crises, we should first draw useful conclusions from the past three major crises in the post–Cold War era. While crises did occur before 1989, notably the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as issues regarding the Taiwan Strait, these cases are less relevant to our understanding of today's crises. Earlier crises involved direct Sino-U.S. confrontation, with each side viewing the other as a key antagonist; the probability of military conflict was both real and high. Post–Cold War crises, on the other hand, occurred against the background of Sino-U.S. cooperation and competition, with neither side necessarily viewing the other as an archenemy.

1. Gilbert R. Winham, ed., *New Issues in International Crisis Management* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988), 14.

2. Michael Brecher, "Toward a Theory of International Crisis Behavior," *International Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1977): 44.

3. Michael D. Swaine, Zhang Tuosheng, and Danielle F. S. Cohen, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 111.

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Major differences between Cold War and post–Cold War cases lie in both the nature of and approaches to the crises.

Given the relevance of the aforementioned three major crises to future crisis management between China and the United States, this monograph will first examine the respective features of each case, drawing some conclusions. This discussion will then be followed by an analysis of Chinese and American characteristics of crisis management. The last section will delineate the types of crises that may arise in the future and recommend how to manage them.

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Existing literature on the reactions of China and the United States during the three major crises already provides a narrative account of the origin, evolution, and conclusion of the crises. It also analyzes individual aspects that contributed, for instance, to the decision-making process, the interactions between the two parties, the role of domestic politics, characteristics of crisis management on both sides, and lessons to be learned.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I will focus on two main questions for each case: First, what was the most prominent issue in the crisis? And second, what conclusions can be drawn from the crisis?

### 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

In May 1995 the Clinton administration, under intense political pressure from Taiwan supporters in Congress, allowed Lee Teng-hui—the president of Taiwan and, in Beijing’s opinion, also an ardent advocate for Taiwan’s independence—to visit his alma mater, Cornell University, where Lee made a provocative speech in June about Taiwan’s democratization and its future. Beijing was infuriated. It saw the sanctioned visit—the first time that a Taiwanese president had traveled to the United States after Washington switched its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979—as a major setback in U.S. policy on the Taiwan issue. Beijing also felt betrayed: the Clinton administration had initially indicated that approving Lee Teng-hui’s trip would be inconsistent with the unofficial nature of U.S.-Taiwan relations. To express its dissatisfaction with the administration’s handling of the issue and to send a warning to Taipei, the PLA launched a series of military exercises in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait in July and August. Washington assumed a low profile vis-à-vis these exercises without taking any major actions.<sup>5</sup>

Later, as Taiwan headed for its presidential election, the PLA launched a series of military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait, starting with the firing of short-range ballistic missiles to areas off the Taiwan port cities of Chilung and Kaohsiung. The objective of the exercises was twofold: to reduce public support for Lee Teng-hui in Taiwan’s forthcoming presidential elections and to warn foreign countries, the United States in particular, against supporting Taiwan’s separatist forces. In response to these exercises, Washington dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the waters close to Taiwan to show U.S. disapproval and to demonstrate its commitment to the island nation’s security as mandated by the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act, which stipulates that the United States would not only provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character but also maintain the capacity to “resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or

4. Literature on this subject includes, among others, Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*; Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel eds., *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking under Stress* (Strategic Study Institute, U.S. Army War College: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, September 2005); Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Center for Crisis Management Studies, *China Institute of Contemporary International Relations*, Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun [On the Management of International Crises] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2003); John Keefe, *Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident*, April 2001 (Center for Strategic Studies, CNA Corporation: Alexandria, Virginia, October 26, 2001); Shirley A. Kan, “China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001: Assessments and Policy Implications,” CRS Report for Congress, updated October 10, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service).

5. Some suggested that the Clinton administration, not happy with Taiwan’s hard push for and handling of Lee Teng-hui’s trip to the United States, thought that the PLA exercises might teach Taipei a useful lesson and therefore decided not to respond (Author’s interview with a U.S. analyst, Washington, D.C., November 2006).

economic system, of the people on Taiwan".<sup>6</sup> This was not only the largest deployment of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific since the Vietnam War but also the first face-off between Chinese and U.S. militaries after President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The Taiwan Strait crisis, as it turned out, not only strained bilateral relations in the short-term but also created a long-term negative impact.

Beijing's use of military means to advance its political goals had been countered by Washington's own military response, and both sides prepared for a worst-case scenario. On the U.S. side, there was concern that Beijing might attack Taiwan or one of the offshore islands, and, as a result, the U.S. government maintained a wary readiness to respond to such an event.<sup>7</sup> On the Chinese side, Beijing worried that the United States might attempt to interrupt its military exercises by sending the aircraft carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait.<sup>8</sup> Under such circumstances, even though both sides just intended to deliver strong political signals through military actions, the risk of an inadvertent conflict did exist. The United States might have sent the aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait as a preventive measure, and China, to show that it was not intimidated by such naval presence, would have certainly responded strongly to the U.S. show of force. This, in turn, might have invited further reactions from the United States, and the chain of actions and reactions could have spiraled into a military encounter.

Under these circumstances, it was crucial that neither side misjudged the other and did not react because of a miscalculation. The key challenge, therefore, was how each side could explicitly and effectively communicate its intentions and reduce the risk of conflict.

On the Chinese side, Beijing announced in advance the date, location, and nature of each military exercise, a step that helped to increase the transparency of its military actions and reduce any suspicion on the part of others. With regard to the concern that the PLA might launch attacks on Taiwan, Chinese vice premier and foreign minister Qian Qichen openly reassured the Taiwanese people that they had no reason to panic over missile "tests." Private assurances were also made to the United States that the PLA exercises would be confined to the Chinese island of Pingtan off the Fujian coast, in the midst of rumor and concern that there might be an attack on one of the small, Taiwan-held offshore islands.<sup>9</sup> Such reassurances served to prevent the United States from misjudging the situation and overreacting to China's military exercises.

On the U.S. side, Secretary of Defense William Perry did initially propose that U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups go through the Taiwan Strait in response to the Chinese missile firing. Fortunately, this proposal was opposed by Gen. John Shalikashvili, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Adm. Joseph Prueher of Pacific Command, as they believed that such action would be "unnecessarily provocative."<sup>10</sup> When the decision about the deployment of the aircraft carrier battle groups was announced, reassurances were also made to the Chinese side that they would not enter the Taiwan Strait.<sup>11</sup> As it turned out, the Chinese reaction to the U.S. action was mainly rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Had those battle groups been sent into the Taiwan Strait, however, it is very likely that China would

6. "Taiwan Relations Act," [usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/Taiwan\\_Relations\\_Act.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/Taiwan_Relations_Act.html).

7. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 284.

8. For instance, Chinese premier Li Peng warned on March 17 that "if someone makes a show of force in the Taiwan Strait, that will not only be a futile act, but it also will make the situation all the more complicated." Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 258.

9. *Ibid.*, 251–58.

10. *Ibid.*, 255.

11. Author's interview with a senior PLA officer in Shanghai, April 2006.

12. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 256.

have taken some extra steps to prove that it was not deterred by U.S. forces. Such reactions, had they been more missile firings or submarine maneuvers against the aircraft carriers, would certainly have raised the tension in the Strait.

It is worth noting that during the crisis, the United States endeavored to calm anxieties on both sides, including informing Beijing about U.S. intentions. General Shalikashvili told reporters that the Chinese exercises were a “dry run” intended to intimidate the people of Taiwan, but that he did not expect serious conflict. Winston Lord, assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific affairs, and others stressed the “precautionary” nature of the deployments and insisted that “we were not on the brink of war.”<sup>13</sup> Before the decision was made to deploy aircraft carrier battle groups, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake held a one-day dialogue on March 8 **with visiting Chinese deputy foreign minister Liu Huaqiu** and presented a comprehensive picture about U.S. policy toward China. Of special interest to the Chinese was Lake’s discussion of the Clinton administration’s plan to improve relations with China. Knowledge of this plan, the United States hoped, might help to get Beijing to look beyond the current difficulties in bilateral relations.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the two main parties involved in the crisis, Taiwan also had to be considered. It was important that Taipei not overreact out of fear over Beijing’s missile firings and not take advantage of U.S. naval deployment in the region to take actions that might further aggravate the situation. Aware of this, Washington tried to send messages to both reassure and constrain Taiwan. Before the PLA exercises in March 1996, Taiwan sent an officer to the Pentagon to brief the U.S. side about Taiwan’s possible countermeasures, and the Pentagon assured him that Taiwan had nothing to worry about, as the United States would certainly take such measures.<sup>15</sup> During the crisis, U.S. National Security Council and State Department officials met Taiwan’s National Security Council secretary-general in New York, pointing out that while American support for Taiwan was dependable, the U.S.-PRC relationship was important and needed to be managed carefully and that Taiwan’s security was better served by stable U.S.-China relations than by instability and high tension. They also stressed that both Taiwan and the PRC should avoid provocative military exercises and return to the bargaining table to resolve their differences.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Taiwan originally planned to conduct a **live-fire military exercise on Mazu, an offshore island close to the mainland, as a response to the PLA exercises, but postponed it due to pressure from Washington.**<sup>17</sup>

So, what conclusions can be drawn from these events?

First, China made its actions and intentions transparent with regard to the military exercises, helping reduce U.S. suspicion and the possibility of even stronger reactions by the United States.

Second, the United States did not send aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait, thus avoiding arousing further reactions from Beijing, a development that would have certainly made the situation in the Taiwan Strait much more dangerous.

13. Ibid., 256–57.

14. Comments by former Chinese ambassador Li Daoyu, October 14, 1998. Li was Chinese ambassador to the United States at that time and was present at the **Lake-Liu dialogue**.

15. Zheng Jiwen, Shi Xiaowei, and Shu Xiaohuang, “Jingbao 1996 Nian Taihai Feidan Weiji Fazhan Shimo” [A revelation of the 1996 missile crisis in the Taiwan Strait], *Quanqiu Fangwei Zazhi* [Global Defense] (Taiwan), no. 4 (2006).

16. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 257–58.

17. Robert S. Ross, “**The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force,**” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 115.

Third, both Beijing and Washington maintained communication during the crisis and reassurances were made to each other regarding the limits of their respective actions, thereby reducing anxieties and the possibility of misjudgment on each side.

Fourth, Washington tried to both reassure and constrain Taiwan so that Taipei would not add trouble to an already tense situation.

Finally, in hindsight, the crisis led to a series of developments that neither side had anticipated. On the one hand, the U.S. dispatching of aircraft carriers alarmed the PLA and caused it to speed up the defense modernization aimed at the Taiwan issue.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on the U.S. intervention, China concluded that in order to forestall Taiwan's movement toward independence, the PLA should not only build up its military pressure on the island but also acquire capabilities that could effectively deter the United States from intervening if the use of force were inevitable in the Taiwan Strait. On the other hand, the Taiwan Strait crisis caused the United States to escalate its arms sales to Taiwan, seek the deployment of a missile defense system in Northeast Asia, and strengthen its security cooperation with Japan.

### The 1999 Embassy Bombing

On May 8, 1999, two U.S. Air Force B-2 bombers launched five 2,000-pound joint direct attack munitions on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring more than twenty staff members, as well as seriously damaging the building. This tragic event ignited strong and widespread demonstrations in China against the United States and seriously strained bilateral relations. It took several months for both sides to bring bilateral ties back on track, and it left the Chinese with a long-term negative feeling toward the United States.

Before the embassy bombing, Sino-U.S. relations were already strained by a couple of events. First was the U.S.-led NATO air strike against the former Yugoslavia. China strongly criticized the NATO operation as an audacious violation of Yugoslavian sovereignty and was concerned that China itself might some day be the subject of similar attacks by the United States on the pretext of protecting ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang province in China's Northeast. Second was the unsuccessful April visit to the United States by Chinese premier Zhu Rongji, who wanted to strike a deal with the Clinton administration over China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). President Clinton rejected the Chinese offer at the last minute and left Beijing frustrated and angry. Third was the strong anti-China sentiment rampant in the United States, largely fanned by the Republican Congress, which accused China of nuclear espionage and posing a threat to U.S. national security. Given the above developments, the atmosphere hanging over Sino-U.S. relations on the eve of the tragic bombing of the Chinese embassy featured a mixture of uncertainty, suspicion, and animosity.

Viewed from the angle of crisis management, the internal processes of each side figured most prominently. For the Chinese side, the issue was how the Chinese government handled domestic public demonstrations, and for the U.S. side, the challenge was in how the Clinton administration responded to the crisis.

China's handling of public demonstrations can be divided into three stages: allowing the public to air its anger; implementing damage control; and calming down the demonstrations.

18. Some U.S. military experts did predict this in the wake of the Taiwan Strait crisis. See Yoichi Funabashi, *Alliance Drift* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999), 374–75.

**Stage One:** When the Chinese leadership met on the morning of May 8 to discuss how to handle the crisis, one urgent question was how to deal with the predicted public demonstrations. The leaders certainly anticipated that once news about the embassy bombing spread, the public—especially students—would take to the streets. As it turned out, the leadership did not try to prevent protests from happening. A couple of factors affected their thinking on the issue. First and foremost, the bombing was believed to be intentional rather than mistaken.<sup>19</sup> As such, Chinese officials felt that public demonstrations were a legitimate way, among others, to express the country's indignation.

Second, the embassy bombing made it difficult for top Chinese leaders, somewhat compromised by their past support for better Sino-U.S. relations, to argue for measured reactions. President Jiang Zemin had paid a state visit to the United States in fall 1997 and had hosted President Clinton in China in summer 1998; he had agreed to work toward strategic partnership between two countries, positioning himself as a strong advocate for better relations between the two countries. Premier Zhu Rongji, an enthusiastic supporter of strong ties with the United States, was still feeling the aftereffects of his failed visit to America in the previous month and was criticized for making too many concessions in the negotiations with Washington over China's WTO accession. Against this background, the Belgrade bombing represented a serious blow to their efforts to seek closer relations with the United States, and both had to support some strong reactions to the tragic event.

Even while condoning public demonstrations, however, the Chinese leadership did take some measures to "prevent disorder and loss of control."<sup>20</sup> For instance, students going to protest in front of the U.S. diplomatic facilities were provided transportation so that they would not need to march on the city streets, blocking traffic and, even worse, attracting others, such as large numbers of laid-off workers who might exploit the demonstration for their own purposes.

**Stage Two:** In spite of the precautions, the demonstrations swelled to a degree unanticipated by the Chinese leadership and spread throughout the country, escalating in intensity. In Beijing, the U.S. embassy building was significantly damaged, while the residence of U.S. consul general in Chengdu was burned. The challenge for the government was how to contain the damage while still allowing protests. The leadership met on the afternoon of May 9 and came up with a series of measures in this regard. First, Vice President Hu Jintao delivered a speech on television that evening, calling on the public to remain calm and carry out their protests in accordance with relevant laws, to avoid radical acts, and to guard against attempts to disrupt social order. Hu also tried to assure foreigners that the Chinese government would firmly protect foreign diplomatic missions and their personnel stationed in China and would maintain the safety of foreign nationals engaging in economic, trade, educational, and cultural activities. Second, the Ministry of Education and relevant authorities of metropolitan cities and provinces, universities, and colleges were required to cautiously watch and escort the demonstrators so as to prevent excessively radical moves. Third, additional safeguard measures were undertaken around the missions of NATO member states, including assigning more police to keep order there.<sup>21</sup>

**Stage Three:** Beginning on Monday, May 10, efforts were made to scale down and put an end to the demonstrations. In Beijing, "the security forces began to permit only groups that had written permission from the Public Security Bureau to protest at the U.S. Embassy. Only a small number

19. Author's interview with a senior PLA officer in Shanghai, April 2006.

20. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 356.

21. *Ibid.*, 356.



of state sanctioned groups qualified.”<sup>22</sup> On campus, with the arrival of the work week, students were persuaded to return to the classroom. The Chinese media also aimed to shape public opinion in the direction of solidarity and stability. For instance, *People’s Daily*, the party organ, reported that workers were working hard and students were attending classes, highlighting the central theme of turning anger into motivation and patriotism into labor and learning in order to build a stronger China that others dare not bully. **On May 11, the media also began to broadcast the apologies made by U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright and President Clinton over the tragic event on May 8 and 9. It is not clear why the Chinese media did not report these apologies right away.** It is very likely that the Chinese government viewed them as inadequate. **Also by May 11,** the number of protesters dwindled sharply to only a few hundred, and by May 12 the demonstrations were over.

On the U.S. side, Washington’s initial response was inadequate, prompting the Chinese side to take further actions to express its indignation at the bombing and dissatisfaction with the U.S. attitude, **which only exacerbated the already tense situation. The first response came from U.S. ambassador to China James Sasser, who contacted the Chinese Foreign Ministry on the morning of May 8, apologizing for the “terrible mistake” and offering condolences. “But as the day wore on with no word from Washington (where it was the middle of the night), Chinese anger began to grow.”**<sup>23</sup>

The second response came on the evening of May 8 (Beijing time) when CIA director George Tenet and Secretary of Defense William Cohen issued a joint statement to explain how the bombing incident had happened and to express regret. “Those involved in targeting mistakenly believed that the Federal Directorate of Supply and Procurement was at the location that was hit. That military supply facility was the intended target, certainly not the Chinese embassy. We deeply regret the loss of life and injuries from the bombing.”<sup>24</sup> However, the explanation did not sound convincing to the Chinese, and “deeply regret” was regarded as insufficient phrasing for such a terrible incident. **From the Chinese perspective, an apology was necessary. In Chinese, “apology” sounds more formal and implies a willingness to take responsibility for what has happened.**

The third response came from President Clinton on the night of May 8 (Beijing time). He spoke briefly to reporters in Oklahoma, calling the bombing a “tragic mistake” and expressing his “regrets and condolences” to China. However, in responding to questions from journalists, Clinton rejected labeling the bombing as “barbaric” and insisted that Milosevic’s “ethnic cleansing” policies were “barbaric” and that the allied air strikes must continue until Serbian forces ceased their attacks on Kosovo Albanians.<sup>25</sup> Although Clinton’s comment represented a response from the highest level in the U.S. government, **it was regarded as insincere and inadequate by the Chinese** given the fact that it was delivered in an informal way, without an apology. Moreover, his words justifying the NATO air strike against Yugoslavia served only to further anger the Chinese as they believed Clinton was trying to pass the buck to Milosevic.

The fourth response was from Secretary of State Albright, who hand carried a letter of apology addressed to Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan to the Chinese Embassy in Washington on Saturday evening, May 8 (U.S. eastern time). Although conveying “our deep regret about the

22. Ibid., 331.

23. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 370.

24. Ibid., 371.

25. “Clinton Apologizes to China over Embassy Bombing,” May 10, 1999, [www.cnn.com/World/europe/9905/10/kosovo.china.02](http://www.cnn.com/World/europe/9905/10/kosovo.china.02).



tragic, accidental fall of bombs” on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the letter also said that NATO had to continue its operations because it “cannot allow Milosevic’s ‘ethnic cleansing’ to go unchecked.” The letter also accused China of siding with Milosevic on the Kosovo issue.<sup>26</sup> Although Albright’s letter of apology represented a more serious step in U.S. efforts to apologize, it still fell short of addressing **the Chinese concern over how the U.S. government would handle the issue.** In addition, Washington’s insistence on continued air strikes against Yugoslavia and criticism of the Chinese position on the Kosovo issue **made the Chinese government feel that the United States** was not taking the issue of the embassy bombing seriously enough.

The fifth response was from President Clinton on May 9 (U.S. eastern time). With the advice of an interagency working group, he decided to reach out to his Chinese counterpart, President Jiang Zemin. A letter to President Jiang expressed his “apologies and sincere condolences for the pain and casualties brought by the bombing of the Chinese Embassy.” He also tried to talk with Jiang over the Sino-U.S. hotline, but the Chinese side initially declined to arrange the call.<sup>27</sup>

Now the question is, what did China expect the United States to do on the issue? **At that very first meeting by the Chinese leadership after the bombing on the morning of May 8, participants had decided to require the United States to meet a series of conditions in its handling of an investigation of the bombing incident. On the afternoon of May 10, Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan met Ambassador Sasser and raised the following demands of the United States, specifically, that it**

- make an open and official apology to the Chinese government, the Chinese people, and relatives of the Chinese victims;
- carry out a complete and thorough investigation of the NATO attack on China’s embassy in Yugoslavia;
- disclose promptly the detailed results of the investigation;
- punish severely those responsible for the attack.

Compared with Chinese demands, the initial reactions from the U.S. side were obviously inadequate. Disappointed at the initial U.S. responses, Beijing found it necessary to take further steps to pressure Washington to respond adequately given its domestic political situation. As the Chinese leaders met during the afternoon of May 9, they decided to impose some constraints on Sino-U.S. relations. Such measures included postponing high-level military contacts and consultations on proliferation prevention, arms control, and international security, as well as suspending dialogue over human rights between the two countries. The leadership also authorized the Beijing municipal government to approve the applications by the students to stage demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> On May 10, the Chinese media raised its voice by stridently denouncing America’s “criminal acts” in Belgrade and pledging that the Chinese people would prove that they “cannot be bullied.”<sup>29</sup>

In hindsight, May 10 should be regarded as a turning point in the crisis, because from this date the Clinton administration began to take a series of measures to meet these Chinese demands. On that day, in remarks before a ceremony on youth and violence at the White House, Clinton said, “I want to say to the Chinese people and to the leaders of China, I apologize, I regret this.”

26. Author’s interview with a U.S. analyst in Washington D.C., February 2007.

27. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 337–38.

28. *Ibid.*, 356.

29. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 372.

He also said that he would like to reaffirm his commitment to strong U.S.-China relations. On May 12, when the special airplane sent by the Chinese government to Yugoslavia to evacuate embassy staff members returned to Beijing, the U.S. embassy and consulates in China had their national flags flown at half-staff in respect for the dead. On May 13 Clinton met with Chinese ambassador Li Zhaoxing at the White House and signed a Chinese embassy book of condolences for the bombing victims: "With profound grief and sincere condolences for the victims, their families and the people of China."<sup>30</sup>

These steps helped to create an atmosphere allowing President Clinton to call President Jiang. On May 14, Jiang heard from Clinton, who expressed his regrets for the embassy bombing and said that he would order a complete and comprehensive investigation into the incident. He would also send his personal envoy to Beijing to report the findings directly to the Chinese. Jiang emphasized that the NATO attack on the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia was a serious infringement on Chinese sovereignty and an affront to the feelings of the Chinese people. He also urged the U.S. government to make a comprehensive, thorough, and fair investigation into the incident and promptly make the results of the investigation public.<sup>31</sup> The Jiang-Clinton phone call marked a reduction of tension between the two countries, as well as a mitigation of the crisis.

What conclusions can be drawn from these events? First, the initial response from the U.S. side was slow and inadequate relative to Chinese needs. The Chinese felt that the Clinton administration did not seem to take this incident very seriously at the outset. Perhaps Washington just viewed it as a mistake, frequently experienced in any military operation. Also, as some researchers noted, "NSC policy makers likely underestimated how intensely China would respond to the attack."<sup>32</sup> To some extent, the Clinton administration was slow in responding. Had President Clinton promptly made a statement apologizing to the Chinese, promising to investigate the incident and punish those who were responsible, and expressing a willingness to compensate the Chinese side for the loss of both lives and properties, the Chinese reaction might have been very different.

Second, the Chinese leadership, while turning on a green light for public demonstrations, did not fully anticipate the scale and intensity of the protests, so the safety measures taken to protect U.S. diplomatic facilities were inadequate. Although the Chinese government rushed to redress the situation on the second day of the protests by calling for restraint and strengthening security measures around NATO missions, there was a real danger that demonstrations might get out of control. From a U.S. perspective, the public demonstration was already out of control, and physical damage wrought to U.S. diplomatic facilities further poisoned the atmosphere between the two countries. The Chinese leadership certainly drew lessons from this case, and as will be seen in the EP-3 crisis, tougher measures were taken to prevent public demonstrations.

Third, the Chinese reaction, although partly informed by the strained atmosphere in bilateral relations, was mainly driven by the assumption that the Chinese embassy bombing had been plotted by "rogue elements" within U.S. military and intelligence circles. Although such an attack might not have been construed as completely accidental, Beijing might have jumped too soon to its conclusion. It would have been more helpful if Beijing had stayed open-minded pending further investigation and evidence.

30. "U.S. Led NATO's Attack on the Chinese Embassy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," [www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/bmdyzs/gjlb/3432/3441/t17317.htm#](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/bmdyzs/gjlb/3432/3441/t17317.htm#).

31. Ibid.

32. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 335–36.

## The EP-3 Incident in 2001

Compared with the Taiwan Strait and embassy bombing episodes in which reassurance and internal policymaking characterized events that unfolded after the crisis, the EP-3 incident featured bargaining between the two sides. In fact, the midair collision was by itself not necessarily a crisis. It was the handling (or mishandling) of the incident that caused a diplomatic dilemma between China and the United States. This case study will therefore focus on how Beijing and Washington interacted with each other, bargaining and compromising, leading to the final solution.

On April 1, 2001, an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane on an intelligence mission on China collided with an intercepting Chinese F-8 fighter over the South China Sea. The collision caused the loss of the Chinese pilot and plane and forced the emergency landing of the EP-3 at a military base on China's Hainan Island. While the EP-3's crew of twenty-four was detained, Beijing and Washington were faced with some hard bargaining. The incident caused Sino-U.S. relations to deteriorate in the early days of the Bush administration and hardened the Pentagon's already tough attitude toward China.

To better understand the context in which the incident occurred, two things are worth mentioning. One is that beginning in the latter half of 2000, the U.S. military increased its reconnaissance flights, flying four to five times a week about fifty miles off China's coast.<sup>33</sup> After NATO operations in Kosovo, the United States was able to redeploy some of its reconnaissance planes from Europe for this purpose.<sup>34</sup> Such surveillance flights also drew closer to the Chinese coast. In May 2000 PLA officers complained to their American counterparts at a maritime military security meeting in Honolulu that the U.S. reconnaissance flights were coming too close to the Chinese coast and that might cause trouble. But the U.S. participants refuted the Chinese concerns, arguing that the planes were in international air space and the United States had no intention of modifying its surveillance flights.<sup>35</sup> Then, beginning in December 2000, the PLA began to intercept the reconnaissance flights more aggressively. The United States lodged two protests with China, in December 2000 and in January 2001.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the reconnaissance flights continued, and the PLA did not adjust its pattern of interceptions.

That the Bush administration came into office assuming that China was America's "strategic competitor," in contrast with the Clinton administration's declared goal of building toward a constructive strategic partnership, did not benefit the situation. The Bush Pentagon was planning a major adjustment of U.S. military strategy with China as the primary target. The policy elite in China was concerned with the ominous developments in U.S. strategy toward China and debated over how to deal with them. The overall atmosphere in bilateral relations was both uncertain and strained.

After the midair collision, the first reaction came from the U.S. side, with a statement from the Pacific Command, on April 1, asking China to "respect the integrity of the aircraft and the well-being and safety of the crew in accordance with international practices, expedite any necessary repairs to the aircraft, and facilitate the immediate return of the aircraft and crew."<sup>37</sup> The statement implied the Pacific Command viewed the incident as a minor episode and expected China to return the crew and aircraft immediately and even to repair the aircraft. It should not be a surprise that

33. Kan, "China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001," 15.

34. Author's interview with U.S. analyst in Washington, D.C., March 2007.

35. Thomas E. Ricks, "Anger over Flights Grew in Past Year," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2001.

36. Kan, "China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001," 14, 19.

37. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 380.

the Chinese did not return the crew and airplane immediately without first conducting an investigation—especially because a U.S. surveillance plane had been involved and a Chinese pilot had died and a plane had been lost.

The Pacific Command had rushed to issue its statement “partly because it was the middle of the night in Washington, but also because officials did not yet know all the facts and the United States had not yet reached a fully coordinated policy decision on the handling of the situation.”<sup>38</sup> However, this step turned out to be counterproductive. Because the incident had been made public, a solution through quiet diplomacy was impossible.<sup>39</sup> Also, the command’s demands that China expedite any necessary repairs to the aircraft and facilitate the immediate return of the aircraft and crew appeared both excessive and arrogant to Beijing and only worked to evoke negative reaction.

After receiving initial reports on the incident, the Chinese leaders came to a two-point conclusion: first, this was an accident, not a deliberate action (unlike the embassy bombing in 1999); second, the issue should be resolved as soon as possible.<sup>40</sup> On the evening of April 1, Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong met with U.S. ambassador Joseph Prueher. Zhou stated that the direct cause of the collision had been the U.S. aircraft’s sudden turn in midair and that all the responsibility lay with the United States. He demanded that the U.S. provide explanations about the collision and the issues related to the event. Here it was not that clear what exactly China asked for: a factual explanation about why this happened or an apology for what happened? Whatever the case, at this point, as the Chinese government was still investigating the incident, including the EP-3’s mission and what intelligence it might have obtained, its position on resolving the issue was not yet decided. Prueher disagreed about who was responsible for the event and requested a meeting with the U.S. crew and the opportunity to examine the aircraft as soon as possible. Zhou did not agree to Prueher’s requests for access to the crew and plane, but he did inform him that the crew members were safe, and China had made proper arrangements for them.<sup>41</sup> As it turned out, China’s refusal to grant U.S. access to the crew gave rise to anxiety on the part of the Bush administration.

About twenty-four hours later, Zhou Wenzhong called another emergency meeting with Ambassador Prueher, this time with a clearer demand that the United States shoulder responsibility for the event and apologize to China.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Zhou also told Prueher that the U.S. side could meet the crew the next evening. However, at this stage, Beijing had not made up its mind over when and under what conditions that it would return the crew and aircraft.

Not happy with China’s position as demonstrated at the first meeting between Zhou and Prueher, the Bush administration decided to push. On the evening of April 1, President Bush was briefed about the event. His first reaction was that this was just an accident and that the Chinese would release the crew within twenty-four hours and then negotiate for the return of the plane. Based on this judgment, Bush did not take any action.<sup>43</sup> However, China did not release the crew as early as Bush had anticipated. On the evening of April 2, Bush held a National Security Council meeting to discuss this issue. Concerned with the possibility of the crew being held as hostage by the Chinese side, and possibly also urged by hard-liners such as Donald Rumsfeld, Bush made a public

38. *Ibid.*, 379–80.

39. Author’s interview with a senior Chinese diplomat in Washington, D.C., September 2006.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 395.

42. Xinhua News Agency, “China Summons again U.S. Ambassador”; April 3, 2001, *People’s Daily*, April 4, 2001.

43. *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, 245.

statement: “Our priorities are the prompt and safe return of the crew, and the return of the aircraft without further damaging or tampering.” Bush also pushed the Chinese side to grant U.S. embassy personnel access to the crew members, stressing that he was “troubled by the lack of a timely Chinese response to our request for this access.” Moreover, Bush issued a warning that “failure of the Chinese government to react promptly to our request is inconsistent with standard diplomatic practice, and with the expressed desire of both our countries for better relations.”<sup>44</sup> Bush’s reaction surprised the Chinese not only because he chose to make a public statement but also because of the harshness in it. As one person from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing observed, “The Chinese apparently heard an implicit threat in his words.”<sup>45</sup>

Bush’s public statement served only to worsen the atmosphere. First, it placed the crisis at the highest level of leadership. Before Bush’s statement, interaction had been mainly between Chinese Foreign Ministry officials and U.S. embassy personnel. Now Chinese president Jiang Zemin was forced to respond, reducing each side’s ability to negotiate in order to expedite the solution and bringing the two leaders to a kind of face-off. Second, Bush’s strongly worded statement caused the Chinese side to toughen its stance, going beyond the call for an apology only. On April 3, Jiang publicly maintained that the United States should bear full responsibility for the collision and offer an apology to the Chinese people, and he demanded an immediate halt to all U.S. surveillance flights in areas close to the Chinese coast.<sup>46</sup>

Bush’s public statement was not the only thing that bothered China. In the wake of the midair collision, the Pentagon had ordered three U.S. Navy destroyers on their way back to the U.S. West Coast from the Gulf region to move closer to Hainan Island. As a news account reported, the order was “an unmistakable attempt to up the pressure on China and a sign that the U.S. is becoming increasingly frustrated with the failure of the Chinese to let American diplomats meet with the crew.”<sup>47</sup> From the Chinese perspective, however, this provocative posture only seemed reminiscent of the “gunboat diplomacy” pursued by the Western powers in China during the “Century of Humiliation” (1840–1949). Moreover, it was reported that Adm. Dennis Blair even proposed to send U.S. aircraft battle groups to the region. Fortunately, his proposal was turned down by the White House.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, it would have only further aggravated the situation.

Following Jiang’s statement, Chinese leaders decided on a series of guidelines and objectives to handle the event. First on the agenda was to engage in a resolute struggle against what they saw as the poor response on the part of the United States so as to safeguard China’s sovereignty and dignity; next came the need to use reason, advantage, and restraint and to strive for an early solution of the issue so as to maintain the stability of the overall Sino-U.S. relations. More specifically, the group devised a three-step approach to the issue:

- The U.S. crew could leave China once the U.S. government apologized—this position was described as “you apologize, we release the crew members (*ni daoqian, wo fang ren*).”
- The problem of the return of the EP-3 aircraft needed to be solved.

44. “Statement by the President on American Plane and Crew in China,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 2, 2001, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010402-2.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010402-2.html)

45. Keefe, “Anatomy of the EP-3 incident, April 2001,” 6–7.

46. “President Jiang Talks about the Incident of U.S. Reconnaissance Plane Crashing Chinese Military aircraft,” *People’s Daily*, April 4, 2001.

47. David Martin, “US Officials Trying to Secure Release of Navy Spy Plane Crew from China,” *CBS News Transcript*, April 2, 2001.

48. *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, 246.

- China was to demand that the United States cease hostile reconnaissance and reimburse Chinese losses.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, on the U.S. side, Bush decided to rebuke Jiang by speaking in an even tougher tone and further exerting pressure on China. In a statement released on the afternoon of April 3, Bush noted that his approach to this issue “has been to keep this accident from becoming an international incident” and that he had allowed the Chinese government time to do the right thing. He warned, however, “This accident has the potential of undermining our hopes for a fruitful and productive relationship between our two countries. To keep that from happening, our servicemen and women need to come home.”<sup>50</sup> Bush tried to leverage bilateral relations in order to force the Chinese side to back down while ignoring Chinese demands.

April 4 turned out to be a turning point in the crisis. Disappointed at Bush’s response, China reacted by taking two steps. Before leaving for a Latin American visit, President Jiang spoke about the matter again. He reiterated that the United States should bear full responsibility for the incident and apologize, emphasizing at the same time that Washington should do something conducive to the development of bilateral relations rather than making comments that confounded right and wrong and were detrimental to Sino-U.S. relations.<sup>51</sup> On that same day, Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan called a meeting with Ambassador Prueher during which he harshly criticized the U.S. attitude and moves. He expressed concern that the United States should not arrive at incorrect judgments or do anything that would escalate and complicate the matter. And he delivered a clear message that if the United States recognized its mistake and apologized, China would allow the crew to leave.<sup>52</sup>

With the U.S. State Department taking over the lead in the handling of the crisis, Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a letter to Chinese vice premier Qian Qichen, also on April 4, proposing a series of steps for resolving the incident and expressing regret over the loss of the Chinese pilot. Powell also publicly stated his regret about the missing Chinese pilot while talking with U.S. media in Washington that same day.<sup>53</sup> On April 5 President Bush also expressed regret over the missing Chinese pilot and the loss of the Chinese aircraft.<sup>54</sup> And President Jiang, who was then visiting Chile, responded in a more conciliatory tone. Although he insisted that the United States should still apologize to the Chinese people for the collision, he noted that the two countries should work cautiously together toward a resolution of the incident that would benefit overall bilateral relations.<sup>55</sup>

The change in U.S. attitude toward the incident quickly turned around the crisis. On April 5 Ambassador Prueher met with Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong to work out a five-step plan. Step one was to publish in the Chinese press one paragraph from Powell’s letter to Qian in which Powell expressed his regret about the loss of the Chinese pilot. Step two was to be an official U.S. statement in the form of a letter from the ambassador expressing sentiment about the

49. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 396–97. Author’s interview with a senior Chinese diplomat in Washington, D.C., September 2006.

50. “Statement by the President,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 3, 2001, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010403-3.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010403-3.html).

51. Yang Guoqiang and Wu Liming, “U.S. Should Apologize to Chinese People,” *People’s Daily*, April 5, 2001.

52. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 398.

53. *Ibid.*, 382.

54. “Remarks by the President at American Society of Newspaper Editors Annual Convention,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 5, 2001, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010405-5.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010405-5.html).

55. *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, 268.



loss of life in the collision and regret about entering Chinese airspace. The next three steps were to involve the release of the aircrew, the convening of a meeting to discuss preventing future accidents, and the return of the aircraft.<sup>56</sup>

From April 6 to 9, the two sides engaged in intense negotiations over the wording of the official U.S. statement. The Chinese side wanted the United States to apologize for the loss of the Chinese pilot, as well as for landing the EP-3 on Hainan Island without permission, but U.S. negotiators did not want to apologize for anything that occurred in connection with the collision. Therefore, the negotiations were largely concentrated on finding an expression acceptable to both sides. After several rounds of consultations, the wording was changed from the original “regret,” to “sorry,” and finally to “very sorry.”<sup>57</sup> This result was a compromise: the U.S. side used words that it had initially rejected, and the Chinese side accepted something less than what it had wanted.

As both sides engaged in hard bargaining across the negotiation table, each side tried to strengthen its respective bargaining position and exert pressure on the other. China’s aviation experts and PLA air force officers made comments asserting that U.S. aircraft caused the collision and should bear full responsibility for the incident. The widow of the missing Chinese pilot wrote to President Bush, condemning the U.S. surveillance along the Chinese coast that had led to the collision and accusing the Bush administration of being too stingy to express an apology to China. The Chinese media gave a full airing of the public outcry, condemning U.S. hegemonic behavior and endorsing the Chinese government’s approach to the issue. Chinese negotiators also called on their U.S. counterparts to pay attention to the strong public opinion in China. As one U.S. embassy staff noted, “The Chinese government repeatedly expressed to us the pressure that the Chinese public was bringing to bear. Popular opinion demanded a tough response, Chinese officials said.”<sup>58</sup> The Chinese media also carried reports on international reactions, highlighting the sympathy and support for China from all over the world.

On the U.S. side, the Bush administration issued an order for U.S. officials to suspend social contacts with Chinese officials. U.S. officials even refused to meet visiting Chinese scholars. Six congressional delegations that had been scheduled to visit China during the April recess cancelled their trips. Senator Craig Thomas introduced a resolution signed by eleven senators urging China to immediately release the U.S. crew. Henry Hyde, chairman of the House Committee on International Relations, used the word “hostage” in describing the crew, raising the sense of crisis. Moreover, relatives of the crew members tied yellow ribbons onto the trees on Capitol Hill, urging Congress to press for their early return. The approaching Easter holiday was widely taken as a deadline for the release of the crew and thus created the sense of a countdown.

After several days’ hard bargaining, on the afternoon of April 11, Ambassador Prueher presented a letter in his name to Chinese foreign minister Tang, noting that the United States wanted to convey to the Chinese people and the family of the missing pilot that it was “very sorry” for their loss. The letter also said that the United States was “very sorry” that the U.S. aircraft did not have verbal clearance to enter China’s airspace and land.<sup>59</sup> On the early morning of April 12, two days before Easter, the U.S. crew left China, ending the crisis, although the issue of the aircraft’s return remained.

56. Keefe, “Anatomy of the EP-3 incident, April 2001,” 7.

57. Swaine, Zhang and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 400.

58. Keefe, “Anatomy of the EP-3 incident, April 2001,” 10.

59. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 400.

The management of the EP-3 crisis resulted in many lessons for both sides. While the right steps taken by both sides helped lead to the resolution of the issue, the missteps taken by each caused the escalation of the crisis and postponed its resolution.

On the U.S. side, the following actions contributed to the management and solution of the crisis. First, on April 3, the White House asked the Pacific Command to withdraw three destroyers deployed in the South China Sea in the wake of the collision and turned down its proposal to send an aircraft carrier battle group to the same area. Second, also on April 3, as noted above, the White House decided to let the State Department take the lead in crisis management. Third, after the initial stage, the White House also asked Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to stay tightlipped, avoiding poisoning the atmosphere between the two countries. Fourth, the Bush administration abstained from labeling the U.S. crew “hostages” so as not to further raise the level of tension. Finally, while rejecting an outright apology, the Bush administration did use the words “very sorry” to express some remorse for the loss of the Chinese pilot and plane, as well as for the EP-3’s landing on Chinese soil without China’s permission. This gesture met China’s minimum conditions for the release of the crew.

On the other hand, some U.S. actions were not helpful in managing the crisis. First, the deployment of three U.S. navy destroyers in the South China Sea served only to aggravate the situation.

Second, as noted earlier, Bush’s tough public statement on April 2 not only led to an exchange of harsh words between the two countries at the highest level but also caused a hardening of the Chinese stance. It would have been quite different had Bush contacted President Jiang privately. In a crisis like this, quiet diplomacy works better than a public statement that raises the demands and urges the other side to meet them.

Third, some of the demands—for instance, the immediate return of the aircraft and crew and respect for the integrity of the aircraft—were considered excessive and very inappropriate by the Chinese side. After all, the EP-3 is not a civilian aircraft. It was a military plane on a surveillance flight near China, and the collision had caused the loss of a Chinese pilot and a plane. To the Chinese, the circumstances of the incident required an investigation and consultations between the two countries. The U.S. demand that China respect the integrity of the EP-3 and not access it was also annoying to the Chinese. China rejected such a demand as lacking legal basis, and one report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service even wrote that “[w]hether state aircraft in distress are immune from entry and examination upon landing in a foreign country appears uncertain.”<sup>60</sup>

On the Chinese side, the following actions were helpful to the management of the crisis. First, given the nature of the incident, the military was heavily involved in the management of the crisis, but it was the leadership that made the decisions and the Foreign Ministry that was in charge of negotiation with the U.S. side. Such an arrangement ensured that the issue would be handled equitably between both national security and foreign relations concerns, thus avoiding an approach derived mainly from a military perspective.

Second, the guidelines established by the leadership for the handling of the crisis as described above were appropriate. They addressed China’s concern over sovereignty and national dignity while also taking into consideration the importance of Sino-U.S. relations.

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60. Kan, “China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001,” 20.



Third, China demonstrated flexibility over the conditions for release of the crew. The initial conditions required that the United States take full responsibility for the incident, apologize to China, and stop all surveillance flights close to China's coast. After it became clear that insistence on those conditions would not lead to an early solution, Beijing reduced its demand to one item: an apology. Then, as the negotiations revealed that the Bush administration had no intention of using the word "apology," Beijing accepted the wording of "very sorry." Finally, drawing lessons from the large-scale demonstrations during the embassy bombing crisis, Beijing managed to forestall public demonstrations in the wake of the midair collision. For instance, on the evening of April 3, the Department of Propaganda of the Communist Party's Central Committee issued guidelines on media coverage of the aircraft collision.<sup>61</sup> The Chinese media, while fully airing the public anger over the incident, also emphasized that the best way to protect China's sovereignty and national security was to turn China into a strong country through hard work. In spite of some sporadic demonstrations, the Chinese government did not want people to take to the streets. As one U.S. embassy staff observed, "University students wanted to hold demonstrations to vent their anger. The government forbade them from taking such action."<sup>62</sup> Such efforts helped to avoid escalation of the crisis and allowed the negotiations to be conducted in a relatively calm atmosphere.

In hindsight, the Chinese crisis management did show some shortcomings. First was the slow response. It was twelve hours after the collision that Ambassador Prueher and a Chinese Foreign Ministry official first met. This belated response might have been the result of several factors: the incident occurred on the weekend, Chinese leaders were away from Beijing for a tree-planting activity, and it took time to collect the information about the incident and to work out an official position. However, from the perspective of crisis management, the Foreign Ministry could have responded to calls from the U.S. embassy or met the U.S. ambassador earlier, if only to brief the U.S. side about the status of the crew and to set up the contact, while leaving the official Chinese response to a later stage.

The decision on resolving the issue was also belated. It was the third day of the crisis before Beijing finally came up with a clearer sense about its approach to the incident. This could have been worked out when Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong met with Ambassador Prueher on the evening of April 2. Second, since China did not intend to keep the twenty-four U.S. crew members as hostages, it would have been more helpful to release them early and keep the EP-3 aircraft only until both sides could strike a deal over the handling of the aircraft. With the release of the crew, the U.S. reactions, especially from the public, might have been less intense and the sense of crisis less strong. The negative impact of the crisis on bilateral relations might have been less serious and enduring as well.

Finally, it is worth mentioning here that from the very beginning, the two countries could not come to terms on the cause of the incident. The Chinese side accused the U.S. plane of causing the collision, while the U.S. side blamed the Chinese pilot who had perished. Ultimately, the Chinese side no longer focused on the collision's cause once the negotiation started, raising a question about the accuracy of the information provided by the PLA. Clearly, in any crisis situation, it is crucial to obtain the correct information before acting on it.

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61. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 397.

62. Keefe, "Anatomy of the EP-3 incident, April 2001," 13.



## CHINESE AND AMERICAN CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Empirical study of Chinese and American crisis behavior in the above three cases suggests that there is both commonality and distinctiveness in their respective practices. An exploration of these characteristics could help to predict each country's behavior in a future contingency and contribute to the successful management of a future crisis.

One commonality is that both sides tend to take steps to pressure for concessions during the crisis. These steps can only escalate the crisis and heighten tensions. In the case of the embassy bombing, China took some steps to pressure the Clinton administration to redress the mistakes it made. Such actions included postponing high-level military contacts and consultations on proliferation prevention, arms control, and international security and suspending dialogue over human rights between the two countries. During the EP-3 incident, the Bush administration, in an effort to exert pressure on the Chinese side, issued an order for U.S. officials to suspend social contacts with Chinese officials. The six congressional delegations that had been scheduled to visit China during the April recess cancelled their trips. Moreover, in the wake of the crisis, Secretary Rumsfeld, infuriated by Beijing's handling of the incident, decided to punish China by putting a de facto embargo on military exchanges with China. Such actions undermined crisis management but served each state's narrow interests by contributing eventually to beneficial outcomes. Without such actions, there would have been no leverage. This dilemma creates a major challenge to crisis management.

Another commonality is that both sides face the pressures of domestic politics during a crisis. On the Chinese side, as nationalism becomes more appealing to the public and the public becomes more vocal, domestic politics has become a more palpable factor affecting China's crisis behavior. The leadership has to take into account the impact of its handling of the crisis on the legitimacy of the Communist Party and government. In the case of the embassy bombing, for instance, given the nature of the incident, the public sentiment was so fierce that the government dared not prevent people from demonstrating. As President Jiang pointed out: "The outrage of 1.2 billion people is beyond any possible containment."<sup>63</sup> Vice President Hu Jingtao, in his televised speech calling for restraint on the part of the protesters, had to first express approval of their "keen patriotism." From another perspective, allowing the public to air their anger would also put more pressure on the United States, forcing it to address the issue more seriously and be more receptive to Chinese demands. In the case of the EP-3, even though the Chinese government tried to forbid public demonstrations, it was quite aware of and sensitive to public pressure. Beijing worked successfully through state-run media to guide public opinion and to justify its approaches to the issue in the face of the charge that it had been too weak vis-à-vis the United States.

Domestic politics also complicated U.S. efforts at crisis management. Public opinion, the media, and Congress exerted pressure on the president, raising the sense of urgency and, in some cases, constraining his options. In the Taiwan Strait crisis, members of Congress "flooded the White House with letters calling on the president to demonstrate stronger support for Taiwan's threatened democracy," while both the House and Senate passed resolutions to show their respective

63. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 363.

support for the island.<sup>64</sup> In the case of the embassy bombing, most American media outlets asserted that “the Chinese people were not genuinely angry with America; rather, they were manipulated by Communist Party propaganda that called the bombing intentional.”<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, some members of Congress, such as House Majority Whip Tom Delay, criticized President Clinton for being too weak in his handling of the issue.<sup>66</sup> In the EP-3 incident, a few media and members of Congress called the crew “hostages,” fanning the sense of crisis. Some congressional delegates also called for stronger reactions, such as the recall of the U.S. ambassador to China, suspension of military contacts, withdrawal of government guarantees for U.S. investors in China, refusing to renew normal trade relations with China, and opposition to China’s bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games and membership in the WTO. They even linked the incident with arms sales to Taiwan. Congress also passed a number of anti-China resolutions.<sup>67</sup>

One distinctive feature of the Chinese approach to a crisis is the attention paid to responsibility. When a crisis breaks out, the first Chinese reaction is not to figure out how to manage the crisis but to determine who is responsible. If China believes the fault is on the other side, it will ask the other party to take initiatives to redress its mistakes. For instance, in the case of the embassy bombing, Beijing raised a series of demands. Only after Washington responded to most of them did Beijing begin to respond to U.S. overtures to deal with the issue. Likewise, in the case of the EP-3 midair collision, it was after Washington expressed regret and used the phrase “very sorry” that Beijing agreed to release the U.S. crew.

Beijing also emphasizes the preservation of sovereignty and national dignity in its approach to a crisis. As a country that was humiliated by Western powers and militarist Japan in its modern history, and as a developing country that occupies a relatively inferior position vis-à-vis the developed ones in the international system, China is always sensitive to its national dignity. In the case of the EP-3 incident, Beijing insisted that Washington apologize to China before the crew was released. In the eyes of the Chinese leadership, this was a matter of national dignity. As President Jiang stated, “One should not bow his noble head.”<sup>68</sup> Beijing certainly understood that relations with the United States were important and demanding such an apology from the Bush administration might strain bilateral ties, but it believed that China’s national dignity warranted such a demand.

As a result of the concern over responsibility and national dignity, Beijing sometimes pays more attention to symbolic gestures than to substantive issues. In the case of the embassy bombing, Clinton and Albright’s justification of and insistence on the continued NATO operation against Yugoslavia only further enraged the Chinese, while such symbolic gestures like Clinton’s formal and public apology, the half-hoisting of the flags in U.S. diplomatic facilities in China to mourn the Chinese journalists killed in the bombing, and the UN Security Council meeting to look into the bombing issue were important to calm down the strong Chinese sentiment. On the other hand, the more substantive issues such as the investigation of the causes of the incident and the negotiation over the U.S. reimbursement of Chinese casualties were relegated to second place.

The Chinese approach to crisis management also combined principle and flexibility. In the cases of the embassy bombing and the EP-3 incident, the Chinese leadership came up with guidelines for handling the incidents that provided a broad framework for the Chinese Foreign Ministry in deal-

64. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 258–59.

65. Peter H. Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 18.

66. *Ibid.*, 21.

67. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 412.

68. Author’s interview with a senior PLA officer in Shanghai, April 2006.

ing with the United States. In the case of the embassy bombing, the four demands became important to the management of the crisis. China, however, also showed flexibility in the end when it did not find the U.S. explanation of “mistaken bombing” convincing. Beijing rejected the U.S. version of the story but did not push for further U.S. action in this regard. The Chinese side probably understood that Washington was not going to change its story. In the case of the EP-3 incident, a U.S. apology was set as the principle for releasing the crew, but when the protracted negotiation between the two sides revealed that it was impossible to get the kind of apology China expected, the phrasing of “very sorry” in the letter was accepted. If China had insisted on the use of the exact word of “apology” before it agreed to release the crew, more damage would have been done to bilateral relations. In both cases, China adopted flexibility in its approach, mainly for two reasons: the difficulty of getting American compliance with the Chinese position and concern about overall relations with the United States. Although both incidents were unfortunate, China needed to get beyond each episode and bring bilateral relations back to track.

While a successful crisis management requires speedy actions and reactions, Chinese practice in the embassy bombing and EP-3 collision revealed tardiness. The slow flow of information is one reason. In the case of the embassy bombing, it took some time for Beijing to get a clear sense about what exactly happened thousands of miles away. In the EP-3 incident, Beijing faced the same problem of availability and accuracy of the information. Another contributing factor is the lack of an existing crisis management mechanism at the highest levels. In both cases, a temporary mechanism had to be created to deal with the crisis. Such an ad hoc mechanism could not be efficient in information processing and effective in coordination of actions. The decision-making procedure might slow down the crisis management process as well. As it turned out, in the early stage of both crises, it was the top leaders in the Standing Committee of the Politburo who made decisions. That all the top leaders could not meet easily when necessary during each crisis might also have impeded quick decision making. Although there have been discussions in recent years among Chinese academic and policy circles about the desirability of establishing a Chinese National Security Council, this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, given the Chinese Communist Party’s decision-making system in which the Politburo or its Standing Committee has the final say over all major decisions.

Finally, in a political-military crisis, it is the Foreign Ministry that takes charge of external contact and negotiation. The PLA is involved internally in crisis management, but it is not supposed to be the major point of contact with foreign counterparts or make statements on behalf of the Chinese government. The problem is that the Foreign Ministry may not possess all the necessary information regarding the PLA’s activities. In recent years, the United States has proposed setting up a hotline between Chinese and American militaries as a useful way to manage crises in the future. This may help improve communication to some extent, but its utility is still limited: the PLA either will not say much without the approval of the leadership or will not be authorized to talk to its U.S. counterpart at all.

In comparison with the Chinese concern with who might be responsible for an incident, the U.S. approach demonstrates a strong utilitarian tendency—that is, responses geared to advancing its objectives and maximizing its interests in the crisis.<sup>69</sup> In the Taiwan Strait crisis, the decision to dispatch aircraft carrier battle groups was driven more by the desire to show superior U.S. military might than by the actual need to dampen a conflict in the strait. As noted by William Perry, then U.S. secretary of defense, the Clinton administration anticipated that “the current crisis would be

69. Ding Xiaowen, “Comparison and Contrast of the Characteristics of Handling Diplomatic Crises by China and the United States,” *International Studies* (Beijing) 104, no. 6 (2004): 58.

solved peacefully.” In the eyes of Washington, however, the Chinese government misunderstood the seriousness with which the United States viewed unprovoked military actions directed against Taiwan, and the deployment of aircraft carriers “straightened out the misunderstanding. It also communicated to other countries in the region our commitment to maintaining stability in the region.”<sup>70</sup> In the case of the embassy bombing, the inadequacy of initial U.S. responses was largely attributed to its concentration on the NATO operation in Kosovo. Even though it made a big mistake, Washington emphasized that it would not stop the bombing against Yugoslavia and even blamed Milosevic for the incident. The EP-3 episode attested more clearly than the previous two cases to the utilitarianism in U.S. crisis behavior. Washington called its spy activities routine reconnaissance, insisted that it had the right to do so in China’s exclusive economic zone, demanded the immediate return of the crew and aircraft without expressing regret over what happened, claimed the aircraft as having sovereign immunity, and urged the Chinese not to board it. The Chinese rejected these positions and labeled them as “the logic of the hegemony.”

With its superpower position and utilitarian tendencies, the United States did not appear sensitive to how the Chinese might feel and react in all three crises. Such insensitivities and callousness somehow hindered crisis management or created long-term negative consequences for bilateral relations. In the Taiwan Strait crisis, for instance, the Chinese believed that the United States was part of the problem—it complicated Chinese efforts in seeking reunification with Taiwan by continuing to sell weapons to the island after Sino-U.S. normalization. Furthermore, Washington’s decision to allow Lee Teng-hui to visit the United States in June 1995 caused tensions in both cross-strait and Sino-U.S. relations.<sup>71</sup> To some extent, Beijing’s military exercises were also intended to send a strong signal to Washington regarding its Taiwan policy. By dispatching two aircraft-carrier battle groups to waters near Taiwan, the Clinton administration reminded Beijing that the United States would remain the largest external obstacle to China’s goal of peaceful reunification. As a result, Beijing started to speed up its defense modernization and built up the missile deployment against Taiwan, a development that Washington inadvertently prompted by overreacting to PLA exercises.

In the case of the embassy bombing, given its initial response, the Clinton administration seemed to view the incident as just one of the usual mistaken bombings in U.S. military operations and underestimated the Chinese reactions. Nonetheless, the fact that the Chinese embassy—the symbol of China overseas—was bombed made this incident, even if a mistake, far more serious. This, coupled with the Chinese belief that the bombing had been deliberate, caused Chinese indignation. In the EP-3 incident, while the United States viewed it as an accident coming out of routine reconnaissance, the Chinese viewed it as an example of America’s increasingly hostile and provocative spy activities against China. The loss of the Chinese plane and pilot and the landing of the U.S. spy plane at the Chinese military base without permission all made the country feel victimized by intrusive U.S. military activities in the Western Pacific.

To be sure, the United States has developed over the Cold War years a stronger sense of crisis management and more enhanced institutional capacity to deal with crisis. However, this does not necessarily mean there is always good coordination in crisis management. In fact, the role played by the military in some cases turned out to be both uncooperative and unhelpful. In the case of the embassy bombing, as some observers noted, “the Pentagon brass evinced a clear reluctance

70. Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 97, 99.

71. See, for instance, Seuttinger’s narrative of Chinese vice foreign minister Liu Huaqiu’s conversation with Anthony Lake on March 8, 1996, in *Beyond Tiananmen*, 254.

to share much information about the incident in the high-level crisis management meetings.”<sup>72</sup> Such an attitude certainly added to the difficulty of crisis management. One member of the inter-agency group dealing with the incident complained, “I do not recall many other times during my tenure in government feeling so frustrated by secrecy and bureaucratic incompetence as during the Chinese bombing incident. It was just a disaster.”<sup>73</sup> In the case of the EP-3 incident, as noted earlier, the release of a statement by the Pacific Command made it impossible to solve the incident through “quiet diplomacy,” while the decision to deploy U.S. Navy destroyers in the South China Sea only worked to aggravate the tension, as did President Bush’s early public pronouncement. Under these circumstances, the decision by Bush to let the State Department take charge of the crisis management was both timely and crucial.

The U.S. approach to crisis management always attaches importance to direct communication with the other side. In the Taiwan Strait crisis, the Clinton administration engaged a high-level Chinese Foreign Ministry official visiting the country, expressing concerns over the PLA exercises while also reassuring him of U.S. intentions. In the case of the embassy bombing, Clinton tried to speak directly to the Chinese president by phone in an effort to calm the tense situation. In the EP-3 incident, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing contacted Chinese foreign and defense ministries, attempting to get a sense of the situation with the crew and the aircraft and to learn more about the Chinese reaction. In general, direct communication in a crisis can help avoid miscalculation and expedite resolution of the problem.

Finally, with regard to crisis management, Washington seems to be good at employing its international resources in terms of coordinating with allies and mobilizing their support for the U.S. position. In the Taiwan Strait crisis, both Australia and Japan, America’s two major allies in the region, issued statements expressing concerns over China’s military exercises, probably at Washington’s request. After the EP-3 incident, Bush called leaders in Britain, France, Brazil, and Canada, asking them to quietly exert pressure on China to release the crew.<sup>74</sup> It is nonetheless difficult to assess the effect of these steps on China. In the case of the Taiwan issue, Japan’s involvement only served to irk the Chinese given the fact that Japan had colonized the island for half of a century. In the case of the EP-3 incident, no evidence suggests that pressure from other countries caused Beijing to adjust its position.

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72. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 336.

73. *Ibid.*, 337.

74. *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, 246.





## 4

## AVOIDING AND MANAGING FUTURE CRISIS

While growing economic interdependence and expanding cooperation on international affairs has helped stabilize relations between China and the United States, the strong mutual suspicion and their diverse interests in East Asia also give rise to uncertainty. Even if a systemic strategic rivalry between the two countries can be avoided in the future, some crises are almost inevitable and, if not well managed, will produce both short- and long-term negative impacts on bilateral ties. In a worst-case scenario, it **may lead to some kind of military standoff between China and the United States**. As Susan Shirk has pointed out, "A future crisis with the United States, especially one involving Taiwan or Japan, could arouse the public's ire to the degree that China's leaders might believe that the regime would fall unless they respond militarily to the insult to national honor."<sup>75</sup> This section of the monograph will discuss how to avoid future crises and how to manage them should they arise. Because so much of the literature on this subject is devoted primarily to the general principles regarding crisis management, **I will try to develop a set of specific, tailor-made recommendations** about how to avoid and manage various possible crises between the two nations.

### Taiwan

Taiwan stands as a very likely contributing factor to a Sino-U.S. crisis. The last decade has witnessed the rising secessionist momentum on the island. Even though the victory of the Kuomintang (pro-status quo) in Taiwan's presidential election in March 2008 promises a more stable cross-strait situation in the short run, in the long run Taiwan's internal politics remains fluid and uncertain. Efforts by a future Democratic Progressive Party (pro-independence) government to push for the de jure independence of Taiwan may lead to a situation in which Beijing believes that it has to respond in a more serious way so as to bring the Taiwan issue under control. As China responds forcefully to the challenges posed, the United States will also likely react, leading to tensions and crisis between Beijing and Washington. Also, an accident in the air or at sea in the Taiwan Strait may also give rise to a crisis between the two countries.

**Scenario One: Show of Force by Beijing.** In the future, in order to either stop Taiwan from further pushing the envelope toward independence or force it to back down from the redline in cross-strait relations, Beijing may decide to conduct a large-scale military exercise in the Taiwan Strait as it did in March 1996. Moreover, in order to show its resolve and to exert more effective pressure on Taipei, Beijing may make the exercise even more frightening and coercive than the previous one.

Under these circumstances, Beijing should first and foremost send a clear message to Washington that this is just a show of force and will by no means lead to an actual use of force in the strait. An official announcement of the exercises will not be adequate in reassuring the United States of China's intentions. Beijing should tell Washington privately what it intends to do and what the limit of its actions will be. Also, Beijing should maintain an open channel of communication between the two countries so that they can communicate directly and authoritatively.

In this case, the United States will naturally react negatively to any activity aimed at confronting Taiwan. But by informing Washington of its actions privately, China allows Washington to express

75. Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 254.

its concerns to Beijing privately instead of openly and harshly criticizing China's actions. It is also important that Washington urge Taipei not to overreact to Beijing's saber rattling and further aggravate tensions. Once Washington receives assurance from Beijing regarding Chinese intentions, it should refrain from dispatching aircraft carriers to waters close to Taiwan during the exercises, especially not to the Taiwan Strait.

**Scenario Two: Punitive Use of Force by Beijing.** In the case of Taiwan crossing the redline and changing the status quo, Beijing, instead of launching an all-out military attack on the island, may choose to conduct a punitive strike against some small Taiwanese targets (some offshore islands or facilities at sea, for instance) so as to compel Taipei to retreat. If this step does not work, then Beijing may ratchet up its military pressure, a step that will likely lead to a major confrontation in the Taiwan Strait.

Under these circumstances, it is extremely important for Beijing to send a clear message to Washington that such military action is limited and punitive and will not automatically lead to a large-scale military attack against Taiwan as long as Taipei retreats. It would be more helpful if China could convey to the United States what its "limited" objectives are. Such an assurance possibly could restrain Washington and also pressure Taipei to alter its behavior.

On the U.S. side, it is very likely that Washington will take steps militarily to deter Beijing from escalating its military actions and to demonstrate its commitment to Taiwan's security. However, since Beijing's military actions would be limited at this stage, Washington's military responses should be symbolic and restrained, while its diplomatic efforts should be substantive. While Washington may order some level of military aggregation in the Western Pacific, the U.S. forces should not move too close to the Taiwan Strait. More important, Washington should reassure Beijing that it will work hard to get Taipei to restore the status quo that has been broken. Meanwhile, Washington should tell Taipei clearly and bluntly that the United States would not honor its security commitment to Taiwan if it does not change its course of action. The real danger in this scenario is that U.S. military responses will be substantive, while its political efforts will be inadequate, causing Beijing to lose confidence in the United States and decide to escalate military actions.

**Scenario Three: Accidents across the Taiwan Strait.** It is also imaginable and likely that Chinese and Taiwanese aircrafts and navy ships somehow collide with each other in the air and at sea across the Taiwan Strait. Such a collision could occur accidentally, but it may also occur deliberately if the proindependence government in Taipei believes that a crisis with mainland China would add to its political capital in a presidential election.

However such a collision might happen, both sides will surely point fingers at each other, and tension will arise. Under such circumstances, Beijing should strive to prevent the escalation of the hostility. And the United States should gear its efforts to calming the situation on all sides, both publicly and privately. China should resist the pressure from the military and the public for punishing Taiwan and disengage from the Strait. Meanwhile, Beijing should call for a joint investigation of the accident. Such an investigation could be done through the assistance of the Association of Relations across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF), two semiofficial bodies set up in the early 1990s by Beijing and Taipei, respectively, to deal with issues in cross-strait relations. It is also important that Beijing keep Washington informed of the accident and urge it to constrain Taiwan if evidence suggests that Taipei plotted the incident by making it crystal clear that such destabilizing adventures endanger U.S. support.

It is also desirable that Washington not rush to send an aircraft carrier to the vicinity as such a move would suggest that the U.S. sides with Taiwan in the crisis.

## Korean Peninsula

In spite of growing Sino-U.S. cooperation on the Korean nuclear issue, two significant differences exist between Beijing and Washington on the Korean peninsula question. First, while Washington is more willing to see the collapse of the current leadership in Pyongyang, Beijing would like to see a stable North Korea; second, as Washington is perceived to be interested in bringing the entire Korean peninsula under its strategic influence, Beijing would like to ensure that the North stands free of U.S. military presence. Meanwhile, the U.S. also suspects that China would like to use its growing political and economic influence to secure preferred outcomes regarding the future disposition and orientation of the Korean peninsula, and this may undermine U.S. interests there.<sup>76</sup> Those differences and suspicions undermine the strategic trust between China and the United States and will pose a critical challenge to Sino-U.S. relations when a contingency emerges in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). If the challenge is not well handled, a serious crisis and even direct military conflict may occur.

Two specific scenarios are worth considering here. One supposes a widespread chaos arising in the DPRK—caused by economic difficulty or crisis within the leadership—while the government in Pyongyang remains in place although seriously weakened. Under these circumstances, the outside world should let the DPRK government make efforts to restore its domestic order and abstain from getting involved unless Pyongyang requests it. It is crucial that Washington not try to take advantage of the instability in the country, unilaterally or along with South Korea, to facilitate the collapse of the DPRK government. If it does, it is very likely that China will take measures to help support the DPRK government and stabilize its domestic situation. In that case, China and the United States would be running in opposite directions and may move to a standoff, leading to a direct military conflict, or at the least, giving rise to tensions on the peninsula and hindering Sino-U.S. cooperation on Korean affairs.

Another scenario, a more serious one, would be the loss of political control even though the government still nominally stands. Such circumstances will require external involvement to provide humanitarian assistance and to help restore the social order. In that case, China and the United States should act promptly to share information about what is happening and consult with each other regarding how to handle the situation. They should also get South Korea involved, given its direct and heavy stake in developments in the North. It is advisable that Beijing, Washington, and Seoul call on the United Nations to authorize actions aimed at stabilizing the situation in the DPRK and providing humanitarian assistance to its people. It is also desirable that Washington and Seoul inform Beijing in advance if they are going to deploy more troops to the North-South border to prevent the chaos from spilling over into the South. The United States may be tempted to send some special forces to the North to search for its nuclear weapons and bring them under control. Such actions will not only worry China but also, more dangerously, lead to military conflict with the North Korean army and further aggravate the chaotic situation on the peninsula. On the other hand, China is unlikely to send troops across the border without being asked by the DPRK or prompted by U.S. actions. Beijing, however, may deploy more troops to the border area to tighten its control of the border and respond to possible adverse developments on the peninsula. It would be helpful if Beijing would notify Washington when there are significant movements of troops on the Chinese side of the border.

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76. Scott Snyder and Joel Wit, *Chinese Views: Breaking the Stalemate on the Korean Peninsula*, Special Report 183 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, February 2007), 7.

To better cope with any contingency in North Korea and avoid a possible crisis and even standoff between China and the United States, the two sides should engage in a dialogue on the subject beforehand. Given China's special ties with the DPRK, however, it is difficult for Beijing to discuss openly how to deal jointly with possible instability in North Korea. Nonetheless, the dialogue can be conducted in a less sensitive way. For instance, instead of focusing on how to cooperate, China and the United States could discuss what they are likely to do under specific circumstances and what each hopes the other side will not do, giving each side a better sense of the other's reactions. This will certainly help reduce miscalculations that may lead to a crisis between the two sides in a contingency on the Korean peninsula.

### China-Japan Disputes

China and Japan hold conflicting claims over some parts of the East China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands (known as Senkaku Islands in Japan). Such disputes are not easy to be resolved and may at some point cause conflicts between the two countries. Given the fact that Japan and the United States are allies and Washington has been trying to turn the alliance with Japan into the core of its regional security arrangements, a conflict between China and Japan over the East China Sea or the islands will invite reactions from Washington. Such reactions may help dampen the clash between Beijing and Tokyo, but it may also cause the deterioration of the situation and give rise to a crisis in Sino-U.S. relations.

In the East China Sea dispute, Beijing places its claim on the principle of the natural extension of the continental shelf, while Tokyo insists that the middle line of the East China Sea is the demarcation line. So far Washington has not taken sides over the dispute. Although neither Beijing nor Tokyo will likely try to seek a military solution, there is a possibility of an accidental clash between Chinese and Japanese patrol boats or military planes in the area.<sup>77</sup> In the case of a Sino-Japanese conflict over the East China Sea, the United States should maintain its neutral position and avoid endorsing the claim of either side. Also, Washington should indicate its interest in the peaceful solution and call on both Beijing and Tokyo to exercise self-restraint. Under these circumstances, the hard-liners in Japan and the pro-Japanese forces in the United States will likely push for some U.S. actions to show Washington's support for Japan, such as a U.S.-Japan joint military exercise in the East China Sea or more visible U.S. naval activities in the region. Such actions, if taken by Washington, will only worsen the Sino-Japanese standoff and cause tensions between China and the United States.

The Diaoyu Islands issue is more complicated. China holds that those islands belonged to China for centuries before Japan took control over them after defeating China in the war of 1894–95 and that they should have been returned to China after Japanese surrender at the end of World War II. Japan insists that the Diaoyu Islands were not under Chinese control when it formally incorporated them into Japanese territory in 1895, and they were not included in the territory that Japan renounced under article II of the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed in 1951. The United States, which had occupied the Diaoyu Islands along with Okinawa since the end of World War II, signed the Okinawa Reversion Treaty with Japan in June 1971 and reverted to Tokyo the administrative rights of Okinawa and the Diaoyu Islands. However, Washington tried to maintain neutrality

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77. In recent years, both China and Japan have increased their patrolling activities in the disputed area. See, for instance, Wu Liang and Wu Dan, "Landun Haiyang Weiquan" [Blue shield preserves maritime rights], *Outlook Weekly* (Beijing), no. 21 (2007): 34.

concerning the Japanese and Chinese (including Taiwanese) territorial claims to the Diaoyu Islands. In a communiqué dated October 21, 1971, the State Department stated a position that “the reversal of administrative rights over Okinawa by no means signifies a bias towards any of the demands of the parties involved. Having the administrative rights returned does not work to the advantage of the Japanese claims. Nor should it work to the disadvantage of any other country’s claims.”<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, however, the U.S. government had confirmed that all the treaties, accords, and agreements signed between itself and Japan, including the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, applied equally to “Okinawa and the Senkaku Islands,” as well as to the Japanese mainland.<sup>79</sup> In 1996, amid the Sino-Japanese fuss over the Diaoyu Islands, the U.S. Department of Defense stated, “We do not take a position on matters of sovereignty. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to this area. If Japan was involved in a conflict in which Japanese forces or Japanese personnel came under attack, then the United States would be obligated to support.”<sup>80</sup> It is believed that the Bush administration, in order to secure Japan’s participation in the U.S. Theater Missile Defense system in Northeast Asia and support for a possible U.S. military involvement in the Taiwan contingency, has reaffirmed its support for Japan on the Diaoyu Islands issue.<sup>81</sup>

In recent years, Chinese activists have tried to land on the Diaoyu Islands to assert China’s sovereignty claim but were often intercepted by patrol boats from the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency. If a clash between Japanese patrol boats and the small boats of Chinese activists caused casualties on the part of the latter, then the Chinese government, under pressure from public opinion at home, may have to provide protection to the activists’ “patriotic actions.” This would likely lead to a standoff between the two countries. Under these circumstances, if the United States extends support to Japan through overt actions, such as sending U.S. naval ships there or holding joint military exercises with Japan around the islands, Beijing, not willing to be seen as weak vis-à-vis the Japan-U.S. alliance, would have to respond strongly, and this would inevitably lead to an escalation of the crisis, creating a situation that does not serve the interests of any party.

Since it is unlikely that either Beijing or Tokyo would seek a military solution to the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, a standoff between the two countries caused by some unintended events should not lead to a serious military conflict. The role for the United States, therefore, is to calm rather than stoke the flame. Washington should urge both sides to restrain themselves and should itself avoid taking the aforementioned actions that show support for Japan. Given the possibility that Japan may push for an escalation of the confrontation so as to encourage U.S. involvement on its behalf, Washington should remind Tokyo that U.S. support for Japan is based on a bilateral security alliance and does not mean that Tokyo has a blank check. Beijing, for its part, should also reassure Washington that it does not seek a military solution to the issue. Such reassurance would help keep the United States from getting actively involved in the entanglement.

## Accidental Crisis

In October 1994 a Chinese nuclear submarine navigating in the Yellow Sea was spotted by the U.S. aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk, which sent an antisubmarine plane to monitor the Chinese sub-

78. Larry Niksch, “Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute: The U.S. Legal Relationship and Obligations,” *CRS Report for Congress*, 97-798 F (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, September 30, 1996).

79. *Ibid.*

80. Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift*, 406–07.

81. Wu Xinbo, *Turbulent Water: U.S. Asia-Pacific Security Strategy in the post-Cold War Era* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2006), 147.

marine for up to three days. The Chinese finally had to dispatch two fighters to chase away the U.S. plane. The PLA also issued a private warning to the United States for its harassment of the Chinese nuclear submarine.<sup>82</sup> The incident highlighted the possibility of an accident between two navies at sea. In fact, as China's military modernization speeds up and the PLA navy extends its area of influence, and the United States enhances its surveillance and monitoring of Chinese military activities, some accidents between the two militaries are almost inevitable. As noted earlier in the discussion of the EP-3 collision, in May 2000 PLA officers complained to their American counterparts at a maritime military security meeting that they had concerns that U.S. reconnaissance flights were coming too close to the Chinese coast. They were largely ignored. Several months later, the U.S. side raised the concern over the dangerous intercepting behavior by PLA jet fighters, and the Chinese side did not take it seriously. Soon after, the EP-3 accident occurred.

Nobody knows when and where the next incident will occur, but the EP-3 incident certainly will not be the last one. Drawing on lessons from the past, should a plane or ship collision between Chinese and American militaries occur in the future, the following guidelines should be observed in handling the accident.

First, the two sides should come into contact with each other and set up a channel of communication as soon as possible to exchange information. This will help each side get a grasp of the situation in the shortest possible time. It should also help reduce anxiety on both sides and avoid unhelpful unilateral actions.

Second, neither side should take unilateral action to publicize the accident, especially about the cause of the accident. Before both sides reach a consensus on what exactly led to the collision, releasing a one-sided story could push the other side to respond with its own version, thus locking both sides in different and even opposite positions and making it more difficult for a compromise at a later stage. If it is necessary to provide some information to the media, the information should be about what happened, not how it happened, and both sides should announce that the causes of the accident are under investigation.

Third, both sides should start consultation as soon as possible. The consultation should focus on both the causes and solutions of the accident. If the two sides cannot agree with each other on the causes, then a joint investigation is necessary. In the meantime, the humanitarian dimension of the issue should be addressed. In case an agreement over responsibility cannot be reached after a joint investigation, the two sides should put aside the issue of responsibility and proceed to discuss a solution.

Fourth, both sides should avoid publicly raising demands to each other; an ultimatum or a coercive tone should be avoided, in particular. Demands should be raised privately through the established channel of communication or brought up in consultations. They should be reasonable, taking into account the moral, humanitarian, and legal factors involved, and conducive to the solution of the accident. Moreover, such demands should be framed with due consideration of overall bilateral relations.

Fifth, it is desirable that at the early stage of the crisis, both the Chinese foreign minister and the U.S. secretary of state talk to each other over the phone. Each should express a willingness to adopt a constructive approach to the issue. Should the consultations and negotiations run into a

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82. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 209.

deadlock, the top leaders from both countries should step in, talking to each other over the phone and trying to generate new momentum for the stalled negotiations.

Sixth, while the militaries on both sides will be involved in handling any incident, they should not assume an independent role, nor should they take charge of the consultations and negotiations. As Michael Swaine has pointed out, "Military forces might become more assertive in a crisis than civilian leaders prefer."<sup>83</sup> Ole Holsti also noted this in his study of the Cuban missile crisis: "The missile confrontation illustrated the tendency of military advisers to view crises from a purely military perspective." For instance, as he stated, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were in favor of bombing the missile sites rather than using a blockade as a lever with which to seek a political solution of the situation.<sup>84</sup> An independent and dominant role by the military may undermine the political efforts to managing crises.

Seventh, during the bargaining process, one side may take actions to squeeze concessions from the other. Such actions, be they political, economic, or military, should be revocable and should not cause irrevocable damage to the other's interests. The initiator can also hint to the other side that once the crisis is resolved and bilateral relations returned to the normal state, those punishments can be revoked. Such actions will create not only pressure but also incentives for the other to move in the direction as expected.

Eighth, during a crisis, pressure from public opinion will run high, and it is important that governments try to lead public opinion rather than be led by it. The government should tell the domestic audience that it is able to handle the issue and confident that the crisis will be resolved in a way that serves the country's fundamental national interests. It should forbid government officials from making provocative comments to the media, which can fan the public flame and adversely affect the atmosphere between the two countries.

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83. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 431.

84. Ole Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972), 213.





# 5

## CONCLUSION

Robert McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense during the Cuban missile crisis, noted after the episode, “Today there is no longer such a thing as strategy; there is only crisis management.”<sup>85</sup> This comment fits Sino-U.S. relations today better than it did U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War. Washington and Moscow were locked in a global strategic rivalry in those days, and the employment of strategy was a crucial part of the game, whereas China and the United States today are not engaging in similar strategic competition either regionally or globally. However, the different interests between China and the United States over some important issues—some of them relate to China’s core national interests—may lead to a crisis and, under some circumstances, to a very serious confrontation between two of the most important actors in the post-Cold War world. The consequences of such a conflict can never be overestimated.

To be sure, mutual suspicion will remain a major and chronic headache in Sino-U.S. relations, and it may exacerbate a crisis, contributing to the difficulty of crisis management. As one study shows, the constantly involved enemy image is a conspicuous characteristic of Sino-U.S. crises. “In all the later crises, the enemy image remained alive and made [it] difficult for both countries to manage the issue with more reconciliatory, down-to-earth approaches.”<sup>86</sup> This issue of mutual suspicion should be addressed at both strategic and tactical levels. At the strategic level, both nations should work to increase mutual trust through political and strategic dialogue, to encourage exchanges between the two militaries, and to improve personal relations between the top leaders. At the tactical level, it is imperative that both sides enhance their dialogue over crisis management, not only to get a better sense of each other’s crisis management mechanism but also to develop a capability to accurately interpret each other’s crisis behavior.

While it is important to manage a crisis that has already occurred, it is even more so to prevent the emergence of a crisis, particularly on the Taiwan issue. As Michael Swaine correctly states, “Once in a serious crisis over Taiwan, China and the United States might have great difficulty controlling escalation. Indeed, such a crisis could threaten to explode into a larger war.”<sup>87</sup> To prevent a crisis in the Taiwan Straits, it is important that the United States uphold its “One China” policy, a position that has been pursued since the Carter administration. Washington should also stress to Taipei that U.S. support is not a blank check for Taiwan. Such a reminder is especially necessary when a proindependence party is in power in Taiwan. When evidence suggests that Taiwanese leaders are not taking the warning seriously, Washington should take actions to demonstrate its seriousness. Such actions could not only stop Taiwanese leaders from pressing fervently for change but also reduce Beijing’s anxieties.

85. Ole Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972), 213.

86. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, 134–35.

87. *Ibid.*, 439.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wu Xinbo is professor and deputy director at the Center for American Studies and associate dean at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, where he teaches and writes widely on Sino-U.S. relations and U.S. Asia-Pacific policy. He is the author of *Dollar Diplomacy and Major Powers in China, 1909–1913* (1997) and *Turbulent Water: U.S., Asia-Pacific Security Strategy in the post-Cold War Era* (2006) and has published numerous articles and book chapters in China, the United States, Japan, Germany, South Korea, Singapore, and India. He is also on the editorial board of *The Washington Quarterly*.

Wu entered Fudan University in 1982 as an undergraduate student, receiving his B.A. in history in 1986 and later his PhD in international relations in 1992. He joined Fudan University's Center for American Studies upon completing his studies and spent one year at George Washington University as a visiting scholar in 1994. In the fall of 1997, he was a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Asia-Pacific Research Center and the Henry Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. From January to August 2000, he was a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and from September 2006 to July 2007 he was a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace.

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