

# China Won't Release U.S. Plane, Crew Despite Bush's Intensifying Demands

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Updated April 3, 2001 6:50 am ET

China refused to release a downed U.S. spy plane and its crew, further straining ties between Washington and Beijing. It is unclear whether the incident will significantly compromise U.S. intelligence-gathering in the region.

President Bush demanded that Beijing grant U.S. diplomats "immediate access" to the 24 crew members, who landed the high-tech surveillance plane on Hainan Island off China's southern coast after it collided Sunday with a Chinese fighter jet, which Beijing says crashed into the sea. "Our priorities are the prompt and safe return of the crew and the return of the aircraft without further damaging or tampering," the president said.

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U.S.-China Plane Collision Raises Tensions as Bush Considers Weapons Sale to Taiwan

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U.S. officials said the Chinese promised to let American diplomats visit the crew on Tuesday. But it remains unclear when the crew might leave and whether Beijing will let the U.S. repair and remove the Navy EP-3 surveillance plane.

If it drags on, the standoff is certain to further sour relations between Beijing and the new Bush administration. The incident comes as Washington is deciding whether to sell sophisticated arms and radar equipment to Taiwan. It also appears likely to further aggravate anti-American sentiment in China and increase mistrust toward Beijing among lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

President Bush, speaking on the White House lawn, said that a refusal by Beijing to release the plane would be "inconsistent with standard diplomatic practice, and with the expressed desire of both our countries for better relations."

In a sign of Washington's unease, the Pentagon ordered three Navy destroyers that had been en route to California to stay near Hainan Island until the dispute is resolved.

The plane, one of 12 EP-3s in the U.S. spy fleet, contains the latest in classified electronic eavesdropping equipment. But intelligence experts said the Chinese would be less interested in the hardware than in data on the computer hard drives and tapes of intercepted signals.

"What the Chinese are most intent to know is: 'How vulnerable are we?' " said Norman Polmar, an expert on electronic intelligence. "Any records of actual intercepts would be the most damaging loss to the U.S."

A Pentagon official said the crew had from 15 to 20 minutes between its Mayday call after the collision and the landing in Hainan -- a limited time to destroy most or all of that information. Crews on planes like the EP-3 are trained to follow a standard procedure when captured, destroying the most highly classified intelligence data first and then moving on to destroy equipment. The planes are equipped with special shredders that are capable of destroying everything from paper to electronic equipment. Crews can also jettison classified data and equipment, said a defense industry official familiar with the planes.

In the case of the damaged EP-3, one Pentagon official said, "We know they initiated the plan. We're just not sure how much they got done."

Even if the crew managed to destroy most of the software, the Chinese still may glean some information from an inspection of the hardware. "There is a lot of high-end equipment in there that the Chinese will not have seen," said James Bamford, an author and expert on U.S. eavesdropping efforts.

U.S. officials said that armed Chinese guards boarded the plane soon after it landed to escort the crew off. But it remained unclear whether the Chinese had begun to inspect the spy plane or its contents.

U.S. officials, including Adm. Dennis Blair, head of U.S. forces in the Pacific region, insist the plane is sovereign U.S. territory, similar to an embassy. Legal and intelligence experts dispute that claim. "A warplane or a ship is clearly U.S. property, but its status is in no way comparable to an embassy," said Jeffrey Smith, a lawyer who has served at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The U.S. itself hasn't always honored such claims made by other countries. In a famous case in 1976, the Russians demanded that Japan return a MIG-25 fighter jet that was flown there by a defecting Soviet pilot. The U.S. took nine weeks to dismantle and inspect the plane, piece by piece, before returning it to Moscow in crates.

Then, too, in 1989, the U.S. demanded it be allowed to inspect a MIG-29 that a Soviet defector flew to Turkey. The Turks angered Washington by allowing the Soviets to reclaim the jet.

## **Five years of U.S.-China relations. Some milestones:**

### **1996**

March -- Two U.S. aircraft-carrier battle groups are deployed to the waters off Taiwan after China holds missile tests to intimidate voters there into rejecting a pro-independence candidate in Taiwan's first direct presidential elections.

### **1997**

October -- Chinese President Jiang Zemin visits the U.S., the first visit by a Chinese head of state to the U.S. in 12 years.

### **1998**

June -- GOP senators investigate allegations that the Chinese military illegally contributed to the Democrats' 1996 election campaign and that China gained sensitive missile technology after the failed launch of a Loral satellite. A criminal investigation continues into the satellite matter; the U.S. company has denied any wrongdoing.

July -- President Clinton visits China.

### **1999**

May -- NATO bombs the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, sparking protests. The U.S. says it was an accident.

November -- U.S. and China announce agreement on China's entry to the World Trade Organization.

The U.S. flies frequent surveillance flights near China to collect its naval communications as well as radar and radio signals. Beijing has blamed the U.S. for the collision between the Navy plane and one of two Chinese F-8 jet fighters sent to intercept the U.S. aircraft about 60 miles southeast of Hainan. U.S. officials say the intercept occurred over the South China Sea -- an area that is technically outside of Chinese air space but is claimed by Beijing.

In recent years, the surveillance flights have been a source of growing tension. China has lodged many complaints with visiting senators and Department of Defense officials, said Kurt Campbell, a Pentagon official in the Clinton administration. The Chinese also began to send up their fighter jets more often to chase U.S. spy planes from the area. In the last few months the Chinese have become more bold and aggressive with their fighter jets, flying dangerously close to U.S. planes, Mr. Campbell says.

"The intercepts over the past couple of months have become more aggressive, to the point that we felt that they were endangering the safety of Chinese and American aircraft," said Adm. Blair.

In some cases the Chinese have come within 30 feet of American surveillance planes. On Sunday, the Chinese fighter jet appears to have come from beneath the U.S. surveillance plane and clipped one of its engines, a defense official said.

The tactics employed by the U.S. in China are similar to those it used during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, although the U.S. and the Soviets developed informal rules that governed such activities. "We became comfortable with how the game was played with the Russians," said Mr. Campbell. "We're not there with the Chinese."

## 2000

October -- President Clinton signs the U.S.-China Relations Act of 2000, granting China permanent normal trade relations.

November -- Washington waives sanctions against China for past missile technology transfers to Iran and Pakistan.

## 2001

April -- U.S. reconnaissance plane collides with a Chinese jet fighter, forcing the U.S. craft to make an emergency landing on Chinese soil.

*Source: WSJ research*

Zhu Bangzao, the spokesman of China's Foreign Ministry, on Tuesday quoted Chinese President Jiang Zemin as saying the U.S. should stop reconnaissance flights near the Chinese coast. Mr. Zhu also said Chinese officials have the right to inspect the plane, despite the U.S. claim that it is protected American territory, "Based on Chinese law, and international practice, we have the right to conduct an investigation," Mr. Zhu said at a news conference.

Appearing to mock the American claim that the plane is protected by international law from outside observance without its permission, Mr. Zhu smiled and told reporters: "If this plane is sovereign American territory, how did it land in China?" Meanwhile, a U.S. consular officer and two defense attaches waited on Hainan.

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While U.S. officials said the airmen were uninjured and called the collision an accident, the Chinese jet crashed into the sea. A Foreign Ministry statement late Monday said the search for the missing airman continued.

The collision sparked Chinese indignation. Internet chat sites were aflame with calls for vengeance, some recalling the U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999, which spawned anti-American protests across China and plunged relations to a low point. The U.S. has said the bombing was a mistake. "If the U.S. really attacked our plane, everybody should go out and protest," said Li Xin, a 22-year-old advertising employee in Beijing.

In addition to the pending arms sales to Taiwan -- which members of the Republican Party have lobbied for -- the standoff also comes amid the emergence of several other sensitive issues in the U.S.-China relationship. Washington is pushing aggressively to censure China before the United Nation's Human Rights Commission this month. And with Beijing's bid to join the World Trade Organization stalled, Congress will have to vote again this year on extending China's normal trading rights, a traditionally divisive issue in the relationship.

The U.S. ambassador to China, Joseph Prueher, a retired admiral who once commanded U.S. forces in the Pacific, warned that relations will suffer if the Chinese delay access to the airmen and plane. Although Chinese officials gave assurances on the safety of the crew and plane, U.S. diplomats privately conceded they could not be sure where the airmen were. The plane was presumably still at the Lingshui naval air base, its communications systems shut down because

China had no compatible source of electricity, Mr. Prueher said. The sooner the issue is resolved "the less it bleeds over into other areas," he told reporters.

Amid China's official silence, there were signs that Beijing is eager not to let events spin out of control. The Communist Party's People's Daily and other major state-run newspapers -- which led inflamed attacks against the U.S. after the Belgrade bombing -- buried the news on inside pages.

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