

Flare-Up with China

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The emergency grounding of an American EP-3 surveillance aircraft in China, along with the apparent loss of a Chinese F-8 fighter and its pilot, has the potential to escalate quickly to an even more controversial diplomatic face-off. The chest-thumping on both sides has already begun, and the "he said, she said" finger-pointing of blame by now puts Beijing and Washington in well-entrenched opposing positions.

But this episode, whatever its cause and resolution, highlights far more pressing and troublesome issues the two sides face. Both need to resolve this incident cleanly and quickly. Then, after the huffing and puffing subsides, Washington and Beijing need to address the real problems that loom. Ignoring the warning signs this incident presents will only lead to more serious problems.

It falls to the Chinese side to care for the 24 EP-3 crew members, repair the aircraft as needed and allow for its speedy departure. The longer China dithers, the more this incident will unnecessarily build to a diplomatic crisis. Unfortunately, however, Chinese diplomacy in such sensitive cases usually proves ham-handed: There will be deep divisions between China's military brass and diplomats over what to do, slowing the process and raising hackles with each passing hour. The Chinese Communist leadership faces a critical political transition in the coming year, and no politician in China will want to look weak on an issue infused with nationalist sentiment. Nevertheless, it would be very unwise for Beijing to try to score political-military points.

Second, this incident will have larger repercussions for U.S. security policy toward China in the Western Pacific. Operating out of Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa—only about 400 miles from China—the EP-3 is a small part of a much larger operation in support of U.S. armed forces in the region, much of it to do with China. This incident will highlight the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance vis-à-vis growing Chinese military power in the region: Beijing claims the alliance is "aimed" at China, and the EP-3's grounding will provide ample additional evidence to lambaste U.S. alliance intentions. To keep a deteriorating situation from getting worse, the two sides should conduct a far more serious dialogue on the role and missions and intentions of their armed forces in the Western Pacific and build a modicum of reassurance about their intentions toward one another.

As the Chinese military continues its modernization—especially of its naval and naval air capacities—encounters between the U.S. and Chinese armed forces will increase and intensify. Such U.S. reconnaissance missions, and Chinese intercepts, are already common but have not resulted in a calamitous outcome until now. The two sides have initiated a military maritime safety agreement to help govern increasingly frequent interactions between their navies in the far Western Pacific, especially in the East China Sea between Japan and China. Following Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's recent statement in support of continued U.S.-China military-to-military ties, the two sides should broaden these understandings in relation to air-to-air engagements, or risk even more disastrous results in the years ahead.

Finally, this affair draws even greater attention to the U.S. role in providing for the adequate defense of Taiwan. U.S. forces based at Kadena, a few hundred miles from Taiwan, would be among the first to answer the call in case of a crisis between China and Taiwan. Part of their current mission is to monitor Chinese military activities in the area, just as the EP-3 was doing on Sunday. And while this incident will lead some to argue that China was "sending a signal" about the late-April decisions on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, such a link is unlikely.

Rather, the upcoming arms sales to Taiwan should not be based on politicized reference to unrelated provocations but on the real defense needs of Taiwan. As such, holding off on transferring Aegis battle management systems, while going forward with surveillance aircraft, destroyers, and assistance to improve Taiwan's civil and passive defense capabilities against missile attack makes the most sense at this point. Still, consultations with the Chinese need to make more clear than ever that the United States will not tolerate Chinese military coercion of Taiwan, and that it wants to see a peaceful resolution of differences across the Taiwan Strait, consistent with the wishes of the people on both sides of the dispute.

While cooler heads may prevail on this latest flare-up in U.S.-China relations, passions run high in both countries. The leaders in Beijing and Washington need to get out in front and avoid politicized choices over the incident. This episode should be a wake-up call. Conflict with China is not inevitable, but in the absence of active efforts to manage contentious differences, "minor incidents" will quickly escalate to larger crises.

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