

China Policy, Without Regrets

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Thanks to patient diplomacy, Secretary of State Colin Powell, his team and their counterparts in China have resolved the standoff on Hainan Island. As President Bush said yesterday, it has been a difficult situation for both nations. But while the crisis is over, this is not a time to think we can return to business as usual. On the contrary, there are lessons to be learned in how to deal with a China that will be increasingly capable and, if we are not careful, increasingly willing to frustrate American interests in East Asia.

Beijing held a lot of cards in this incident, but in the end America held the card that mattered most, namely China's long-term need for a stable working relationship with the United States. The White House correctly chose to rely on the State Department to comprehend Chinese sensitivities and pride and to craft statements that, for the Chinese, appeared to "apologize." However, while this situation has been smoothly handled, it should be clear that more senior-level attention to China, and especially to the Chinese military, is needed.

Thus far, the Bush administration's high-level appointees have been lacking in China expertise. Indeed, the administration was very lucky to have the current ambassador—a Clinton holdover slated to leave next month—in China during this imbroglio. Joseph Prueher, an admiral who had held the Pacific command and was an accomplished naval aviator, was able to counter Chinese spin and accusations forcefully. The kind of expertise Mr. Prueher brought to bear will only become more valuable. Contrary to calls on Capitol Hill and in parts of the Pentagon to cut back or suspend military-to-military exchanges, this incident should compel the administration to reshape these ties to help it understand the workings of the People's Liberation Army.

The Hainan case has already revealed more clearly the divisions, and the consequent need for deliberateness, that characterize the Chinese leadership in times of difficulty. We should also note that Beijing's leaders seem prepared to risk a great deal for short-term "victories" on matters of honor. While they can claim to have saved face in this episode, they also put at risk a more cooperative relationship with the United States across a range of issues: technology, trade, missile defense, Taiwan arms sales, and the likelihood that as Beijing's military power grows, there will be increasingly intense interaction between Chinese forces and those of the United States and its allies and friends in the region. At the least, appreciating how deeply the Chinese feel on questions of pride has obvious implications for how we deal with the principal issue that divides the United States and China, namely Taiwan.

Taking away such lessons, the Bush administration will be better positioned to tackle these and other problems that loom over the horizon.

The administration need not wait long to apply what it has learned. The upcoming meeting of the two sides to discuss the Hainan incident should be viewed as an opportunity to set "rules of the road" to govern interactions between our naval forces. Also in the near term, decisions later this month on American arms sales to Taiwan should not be skewed by recent events: while a package of arms transfers is already contemplated, the deal ought not, for now, to include the transfer of destroyers with the Aegis air-defense system.

Looking further ahead, the two sides should revive dormant defense consultation talks and begin a more serious and realistic strategic dialogue. Such discussions will need to address the roles of our respective armed forces in the region, China's provocative defense buildup (which includes nuclear missiles), and how the two sides can maintain a stable relationship in the event that missile- defense systems are built.

In the end, the biggest lesson of all should be to recognize the complexity of our relationship with China. In suggesting this relationship could be understood simply as a "strategic partnership," the Clinton administration set itself up for heavy criticism: witness the allegations of Chinese nuclear spying. The Bush administration should not make the same mistake by boiling the China relationship down to "strategic competition." The Hainan incident shows the need to appreciate nuance and think in the long term. China's plans and ambitions extend well into the future, and so should ours.

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