Wu Xinbo

Understanding Chinese and U.S. Crisis Behavior

There have been two accidental crises between China and the United States in the last decade: the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 and the mid-air collision of a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter plane in April 2001. Such crises not only seriously strained and damaged bilateral ties in the short term, but also created a negative long-term impact on their relations.

In the future, accidental crises may arise from time to time between China and the United States. As China's military modernization speeds up and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy extends its area of influence, the United States has been enhancing its surveillance and monitoring of Chinese military activities, and some accidents between the two militaries are almost inevitable. Examining the most prominent dimensions of the embassy bombing and the mid-air collision, drawing lessons from both, and contrasting the Chinese and U.S. characteristics of crisis behavior can help both sides to deal with future crises better and maintain a stable and productive bilateral relationship.

The 1999 Embassy Bombing

On May 8, 1999, during a NATO bombing mission in Yugoslavia, 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 20 staff members, as well as seriously damaging the build-

Wu Xinbo is a professor and deputy director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. He is also a member of *TWQ*'s editorial board. He may be reached at xbwu@fudan.ac.cn. This paper is part of the project on "Managing Crisis and Sustaining Peace Between China and the United States," which he conducted at the United States Institute of Peace as a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow during 2006–2007.

© 2007 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The Washington Quarterly • 31:1 pp. 61–76.

ing. This tragic event ignited strong and widespread demonstrations in China against the United States and seriously strained bilateral relations.

From a crisis management perspective, the internal processes of each side figured most prominently. For the Chinese side, the issue was how the Chinese government handled domestic public demonstrations. For the U.S. side, the challenge was how the Clinton administration responded to the crisis.

China's Domestic Management

When the Chinese leadership met on the morning of May 8, several hours after the bombing, to discuss how to handle the crisis, one urgent question was how to deal with expected public demonstrations. The leaders certainly anticipated that once the news about the embassy bombing spread, the public, especially students, would take to the streets. The leadership did not try to prevent protests from happening, mainly due to a belief that the bombing was intentional rather than mistaken, even though it was more likely to have been plotted by rogue elements in the U.S. military and intelligence community rather than authorized by President Bill Clinton himself.[1] Beijing did, however, take some measures to "prevent disorder and loss of control."[2] Students going to protest in front of the U.S. diplomatic facilities were provided transportation so that they would not march through the city streets, jamming traffic and, even worse, involving other potential protesters, such as the large numbers of laid-off workers who might exploit the demonstration for their own purposes.

Beijing interpreted the initial U.S. response to the embassy bombing as callous and inadequate.

Despite these precautions, the demonstration swelled to a larger degree than the Chinese leadership had anticipated. The demonstrations spread throughout the country and escalated in intensity. A real danger emerged that the situation might get out of control. In Beijing, the U.S. embassy building was significantly damaged, and the residence of the U.S. consul general in Chengdu was burned. Under these circumstances, the leadership met in the afternoon of May 9 and decided to take a series of measures. First, Vice President Hu Jintao delivered a speech on television that evening, calling on the public to remain calm and to carry out their protests in accordance with relevant laws, avoid radical acts, and guard against attempts to disrupt the social order. Hu also made safety assurances to foreigners in China. Second, the Ministry of Education and relevant authorities of metropolitan cities, provinces, universities, and colleges were required to cautiously watch and escort the

demonstrators in order to prevent excessively radical moves. Third, additional safeguards, such as a police presence, were undertaken around the missions of NATO member states to keep order.[3]

Starting on Monday, May 10, efforts were made to scale down demonstrations and draw an end to them. 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 of state-sanctioned groups qualified."[4] On campus, with the arrival of the workweek, students were persuaded to return to the classroom. The mainstream media was also directed to shape public opinion toward solidarity and stability. On May 11, the Chinese media began to report the formal apologies made earlier by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Clinton. That day, the numbers of protesters dwindled sharply to only a few hundred, and by May 12, the demonstrations were over.

The U.S. Response

Because the mistaken bombing by U.S. aircraft caused the crisis, Washington had to take prompt and adequate measures to reduce the impact of the accident on bilateral relations. Yet, the Chinese interpreted the initial U.S. response as callous and inadequate. This prompted the Chinese side to take further actions to express its indignation at the bombing and dissatisfaction with the U.S. attitude, exacerbating the already tense situation.

The first U.S. response came from Ambassador James Sasser, who contacted the Chinese Foreign Ministry on the morning of May 8 to apologize for the "terrible mistake" and offer condolences. Then–White House official Robert Suettinger noted, however, that, "as the day wore on with no word from Washington (where it was the middle of the night), Chinese anger began to grow."[5]

The second response came on the evening of May 8, when CIA director George Tenet and Secretary of Defense William Cohen issued a joint statement that called the incident a targeting error and said, "We deeply regret the loss of life and injuries from the bombing," explaining to the Chinese side how it happened and expressing remorse.[6] The Chinese were not convinced by the explanation and did not regard "deeply regret" as adequate phrasing for such a terrible incident. In their opinion, an explicit apology was necessary.

The third response came from Clinton that night, when he spoke briefly to reporters in Oklahoma, calling the bombing a "tragic mistake" and expressing his "regrets and condolences" to China.[7] In responding to questions from journalists, however, Clinton refused to label the bombing of the Chinese embassy as "barbaric." He insisted that President Slobodan Milosevic's "ethnic cleansing" policies were "barbaric" and that the allied air strikes must continue until Serbian forces ceased their attacks on Kosovar Albanians. Although Clinton's

comment represented a response from the highest level, it was regarded as insincere and inadequate by the Chinese side, given that it was delivered in an informal way and without an apology. Moreover, his words justifying the NATO air strike against Yugoslavia served only to anger the Chinese further, as they believed Clinton was trying to pass the buck to Milosevic.

Making the EP-3 incident public backfired, making a quiet diplomatic solution impossible.

The fourth response was from Albright, who hand-carried a letter of apology addressed to Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan to the Chinese embassy in Washington on the evening of May 8. Although conveying the United States' "deep regret about the tragic, accidental fall of bombs" on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the letter also said that NATO had to continue its operations because it "[could] not allow Milosevic's 'ethnic cleansing' to go unchecked."[8] Moreover, the letter blamed China for its position on the Kosovo issue.[9] It also called on the Chinese government to reinforce security around the U.S. diplomatic facilities in China.

Although Albright's call represented a more serious step in U.S. efforts, it fell short of addressing the Chinese concerns over how the U.S. government would handle the incident. 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 embassy bombing issue seriously enough.

The fifth response was from Clinton again. Advised by an interagency working group, he decided to reach out to his Chinese counterpart, President Jiang Zemin. On May 9, he sent a letter to Jiang in which he expressed "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 Chinese-U.S. hotline, but the Chinese side initially declined to arrange the call.[10]

Disappointed at the initial U.S. responses, Beijing found it necessary to take further steps to pressure Washington to respond adequately. As the Chinese leaders met during the afternoon of May 9, they decided to impose some constraints on Chinese-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 students to stage demonstrations. The next day, Tang met Sasser and raised the following demands: 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 the embassy; promptly disclose the detailed results of the investigation; and severely punish those responsible for the attack.[11]

At this point, the Clinton administration began to take a series of measures to meet the Chinese demands. On May 10, Clinton gave a formal apology at the White House. On May 12, when the special airplane sent by the Chinese government to Yugoslavia to evacuate embassy staff members and the remains of the victims returned to Beijing, the U.S. embassy and consulates in China had their national flags flown at half-staff out of respect for the dead. On May 13, Clinton met with 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."[12]

The above steps demonstrated a more sincere U.S. attitude toward the incident and created an atmosphere for Jiang to receive a call from Clinton. On May 14, Jiang held a phone conversation with Clinton, who expressed his regrets for the embassy bombing and said that he would order a complete and comprehensive investigation into the incident and that he would send his personal envoy to Beijing to report to the Chinese side on the findings. The Jiang-Clinton dialogue marked a reduction of tension between two countries, as well as a mitigation of the crisis.

Lessons Learned

What lessons can be drawn? First, the initial response from the U.S. side was slow and inadequate from the Chinese perspective. The major reason was that the Clinton administration, from a Chinese viewpoint, did not seem to take this incident very seriously in the beginning. Perhaps Washington just viewed it as a mistake frequently seen in any military operation. Also, as some researchers noted, "[National Security Council] policymakers likely underestimated how intensely China would respond to the attack."[13] Had 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 lives and properties, the Chinese reaction might have been less ferocious.

Second, the Chinese leadership did not fully anticipate the scale and intensity of the public demonstrations. Safety measures taken to protect U.S. diplomatic facilities were therefore inadequate. There was a real danger that demonstrations might get out of control. If, for instance, Chinese demonstrators broke into the U.S. embassy compound and caused death or injuries to U.S. diplomatic personnel, the crisis would have further escalated.

Third, the Chinese reactions were mainly driven by the assumption that the bombing of the Chinese embassy was plotted by some rogue elements within U.S. military and intelligence circles. Although it was difficult to believe that such an attack was completely accidental, Beijing might have jumped to this conclusion too soon. It would have been more helpful if Beijing had stayed open-minded pending further investigation.

The 2001 Mid-air Collision

In the latter half of 2000, the U.S. military began increasing its reconnaissance flights near China, with flights four to five times a week about 50 miles off China's coast.[14] Such surveillance flights sometimes drew closer to the Chinese coast. In May 2000, PLA officers had already complained to their U.S. counterparts at a maritime military security meeting in Honolulu that the U.S. reconnaissance flights were coming too close to the Chinese coast. The U.S. participants rebutted by suggesting that it was international air space and stating that the United States had no intention of modifying its surveillance flights.[15] Beginning in December of that year, the PLA started to intercept U.S. reconnaissance flights more aggressively. Concerned with such dangerous behavior, the United States lodged protests with China in December 2000 and January 2001.[16] Yet, there is no evidence that the United States reduced its reconnaissance flights near China or that the PLA adjusted its pattern of interceptions.

On April 1, 2001, a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane on an intelligence mission near China collided with an intercepting Chinese F-8 fighter over the South China Sea. Damage caused by this collision led to the loss of the Chinese pilot as well as the plane and forced the emergency landing of the EP-3 at a military base on China's Hainan Island. As the 24-person crew on the EP-3 was detained in China, Beijing and Washington faced difficult bargaining in handling the crisis. The incident caused a nosedive in Chinese-U.S. relations in the early days of the Bush administration and hardened the Pentagon's already tough attitude toward China.

Bargains and Compromises

Over a period of 10 days, Beijing and Washington haggled with each other, bargaining and compromising, leading to the final solution of the crisis. The first action after the mid-air collision came from the U.S. side. The Pacific Command issued a statement in the afternoon of April 1 asking the Chinese side 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."[17] The Pacific Command rushed to issue the above 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."[18] In so doing, Pacific Command not only expected to prod Beijing to respond to its demands, but also to push Washington to come into line. This step turned out to be counterproductive. By making the incident public, it made a solution through quiet diplomacy impossible.[19] Also, its demands appeared excessive and arrogant to Beijing and only worked to evoke negative reactions from China.

Beijing sometimes pays more attention to symbolic gestures than to substantive issues.

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 presumption about the embassy bombing in 1999. Second, the issue should be resolved as soon as possible.[20] On the evening of April 1, Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong met with Ambassador Joseph Prueher. Zhou stated that the direct cause of the mid-air collision was a sudden turn by the U.S. aircraft and that all the responsibility for the event lay with the United States. He demanded that the United States provide explanations about the collision and the issues related to the event.

It was not that clear what China requested: a factual explanation about why it happened or an apology for what happened. In fact, at this point, the Chinese government was still investigating the incident, and its position on resolving the issue was not yet decided. Prueher expressed disagreement regarding responsibility for the event and requested a meeting with the 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 Prueher that the 24 U.S. crew members were safe and that China had made proper arrangements for them.[21]

About 24 hours later, Zhou called another emergency meeting with Preuher, this time with a clearer demand that the United States shoulder responsibility for the event and apologize to China.[22] Meanwhile, Zhou also told Preuher that the U.S. side could meet the crew the next evening. At this stage, however, Beijing had not made up its mind over when and under what conditions it would return the crew and aircraft.

Not happy with the Chinese response, the Bush administration decided to push back. On the evening of April 1, President George W. Bush was briefed

about the event. His first reaction was that this was just an accident and the Chinese would release the crew within 24 hours and then negotiate over the return of the plane. Based on this judgment, Bush did not take any action.[23] Yet, China did not release the crew as early as Bush had anticipated.

On the evening of April 2, Bush made a statement saying that "[o]ur priorities are the prompt and safe return of the crew, and the return of the aircraft without further damaging or tampering."[24] In his statement, Bush also pushed the Chinese side to grant U.S. embassy personnel access to U.S. crew members, stressing that he was "troubled by the lack of a timely Chinese response to our request for this access." Moreover, Bush warned 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."

One distinctive feature of the Chinese approach to a crisis is the attention paid to responsibility.

Bush's reaction surprised the Chinese not only because he chose to make a public statement before any private efforts were made, but also because of its harshness. As a U.S. embassy official in Beijing observed, "The Chinese apparently heard an implicit threat in his words."[25] Prior to Bush's statement, the interactions had been mainly between the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the U.S. embassy in China. Bush's actions forced Jiang to respond. This not only reduced the room that might exist for two leaders to intervene as necessary to expedite the solution of the crisis, but also brought two leaders into a face-off.

Second, Bush's strongly worded statement caused the Chinese side to toughen its stance. On April 3, Jiang publicly spoke about the event. He suggested that the United States should bear full responsibility for the collision and apologize to the Chinese people and demanded an immediate halt to all U.S. surveillance flights in areas close to the Chinese coast.[26]

Bush's public statement was not the only irritant for China. In the collision's wake, the Pentagon ordered three U.S. Navy destroyers that were on their way back to the U.S. West Coast from the Persian Gulf region to monitor the situation in the South China Sea, presumably to exert some pressure on China. This move reminded the Chinese of the gunboat diplomacy pursued by the Western powers in China during the "Century of Humiliation" from 1840 to 1949. Beijing responded by putting its troops in the area on first-degree combat readiness and condemning the U.S. actions that added to the tensions. Moreover, it was reported that Admiral Dennis Blair of the Pacific Command even proposed to send U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups to the region. Fortunately, the White House turned down his proposal.[27]

Following Jiang's statement, the Chinese leaders decided to engage in a resolute struggle against what they saw as erroneous U.S. behavior, to safeguard China's sovereignty and dignity, and to strive for an early solution of the issue to maintain the stability of overall Chinese-U.S. relations. More specifically, the Chinese leaders came up with a three-step road map. First, the U.S. crew could leave China once the U.S. government apologized. They would then solve the problem of the return of the EP-3 aircraft and, finally, demand the cessation of hostile reconnaissance as well as reimbursement for Chinese losses.[28]

Bush decided to rebuke Jiang's response by speaking in an even tougher tone. In a statement released on April 3, Bush noted that his approach to this issue "has been to keep this accident from becoming an international incident"[29] and that he had allowed the Chinese government time to do the right thing. He warned, however, that "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."

In contrast, the U.S. approach demonstrates a strong utilitarian tendency.

Disappointed by Bush's response, Jiang reiterated that the United States should bear full responsibility for the incident and apologize and emphasized that Washington should do something conducive to the development of bilateral relations, rather than making comments that confounded right and wrong and that were detrimental to Chinese-U.S. relations.[30] Tang called a meeting with Prueher and harshly criticized the U.S. attitude and actions but also delivered a clear message that if Washington recognized its mistake and apologized to Beijing, Beijing would allow the crew to leave.[31]

Events on April 4 turned out to be a turning point in the crisis. Because the hard-line approach was not working, the Bush administration tried to adopt a more conciliatory one. As the Department of State took over the lead in the interagency group that had formed in Washington to handle the crisis, Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a letter to Vice Premier Qian Qichen 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.[32] The next day, Bush also expressed regret over the missing Chinese pilot and the loss of the Chinese aircraft.[33]

The adjustment of the U.S. approach led to a substantive discussion about the solution of the crisis. On April 5, Prueher met with Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong, working out a five-step plan for resolving the incident. Step one was to fulfill a Chinese request 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 for the United States to issue an official statement, in the form of a letter from the ambassador, expressing regret and apologizing for the Chinese loss of life in the collision and for the U.S. aircraft entering Chinese air space. The next three steps would involve China releasing the crew, a meeting to discuss preventing future accidents, and the return of the aircraft.[34]

Chinese behavior in both cases revealed tardiness.

On April 11, after several days' difficult bargaining over the wording of the U.S. statement, Prueher presented a letter in his name to 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 U.S. side was "very sorry" that it did not have verbal clearance to enter China's air space and land the U.S. aircraft after the accident.[35] On April 12, the U.S. crew left China. The release of the crew put an end to the crisis, although the issue of the return of the aircraft remained to be negotiated.

Shortcomings and Successes

Missteps on each side caused escalation and postponed a resolution, but Washington and Beijing also took certain measures that ended the crisis. On the U.S. side, four actions improved the management of the crisis. First, on April 3, the White House asked the Pacific Command to withdraw the three destroyers deployed in the South China Sea and turned down its proposal to send an aircraft carrier battle group to the same area. Second, also on April 3, the White House decided to let the State Department take the lead in crisis management. Third, after the initial incident, the White House also asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to stay tightlipped, to avoid poisoning the atmosphere between the two countries. Fourth, the Bush administration abstained from labeling the U.S. crew "hostages" so as not to raise the level of tension further.

On the other hand, some U.S. actions were not helpful. First, the initial deployment of the three destroyers served only to aggravate the situation and gave rise to a negative feeling on the Chinese side about the U.S. approach to the incident. 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. Third, the Chinese considered some of the demands, such as the immediate return of the aircraft and crew and respecting the integrity of the aircraft, excessive. After all, the EP-3 was not a civilian aircraft, but a military plane on a surveillance

flight near China resulting in the loss of a Chinese pilot and a plane. All these suggested the need for an investigation by the Chinese side and consultations between the two countries. Washington's demand that Beijing not access the EP-3 was also debatable. The Chinese side was not the only party to question the legal basis of such claims. One U.S. report stated that "[w]hether state aircraft in distress are immune from entry and examination upon landing in a foreign state appears uncertain."[36]

For its part, Beijing set up a sound mechanism to deal with the incident. Given the nature of the event, the military was heavily involved in managing the crisis, but the leadership placed the Foreign Ministry in charge of negotiations with the U.S. side. Second, the guidelines established for handling the crisis helped to engage in a resolute struggle against perceived erroneous U.S. behavior so as to safeguard China's sovereignty and dignity, while striving for an early solution of the issue to maintain the stability of overall Chinese-U.S. relations. Third, China demonstrated flexibility over the conditions for the release of the crew. Finally, drawing lessons from the embassy bombing crisis, Beijing managed to forestall public demonstrations in the wake of the mid-air collision. Such efforts helped to avoid escalation of the crisis and allowed the negotiations to be conducted in a relatively calm atmosphere.

In hindsight, there existed at least two shortcomings with Chinese crisis management behavior. The first was the slow response. The first meeting between Prueher and a Chinese Foreign Ministry official did not take place until 12 hours after the collision occurred. The decision on resolving the issue was also belated, as Beijing did not work out its plan until the third day of the crisis. Second, because China did not intend to keep the 24 U.S. crew members as hostages, it would have been more helpful if China released them once the investigation about their mission and the cause of the collision was done. Meanwhile, China could have still kept the EP-3 aircraft until both sides struck a deal over how to handle the issue. In so doing, U.S. reactions, especially from the public, might have been less intense.

Chinese and U.S. Characteristics of Crisis Management

In these two cases, China exhibited five distinguishing features of their crisis management behavior: paying attention to assigning responsibility for the crisis, emphasizing sovereignty and national dignity, appreciating symbolic gestures greatly, responding relatively slowly, and having the Foreign Ministry in charge of crisis management.

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 it, but to decide who is responsible. If China be-

lieves the fault is on the other side, it will ask the other party to take initiatives to redress its mistakes. In the case of the embassy bombing, Beijing raised a series of demands to the United States. Only after Washington responded to most of them did Beijing begin to respond to U.S. overtures to deal with the issue.

Beijing also emphasizes preserving sovereignty and national dignity in its approach to a crisis. As a country that was humiliated by the Western powers and militarist Japan in its modern history and as a developing country that occupies a relatively inferior position in the international system, China is always sensitive to its national dignity. In the case of the EP-3, Beijing insisted that Washington apologize to China before its crew was released. In the eyes of the Chinese leadership, this was a matter of national dignity.

In a political-military crisis, the Chinese Foreign Ministry takes charge as the point of contact.

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's and Albright's justification of and insistence on the continued NATO operation against Yugoslavia only further enraged the Chinese. On the other hand, symbolic gestures such as Clinton's formal and public apology, the half-mast 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 calmed strong Chinese sentiments. 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.

Even though successful crisis management requires speedy actions and reactions, Chinese behavior in each case revealed tardiness. The slow flow of information within the Chinese system is one reason. Another contributing factor is the lack of an existent crisis-management mechanism. In each case, a temporary mechanism had to be created to deal with the crisis. Such an ad hoc mechanism could not be expected to process information efficiently and coordinate actions effectively.

Finally, in a political-military crisis, the Foreign Ministry takes charge of external contact and negotiation. The PLA is involved internally in crisis management, but they are not supposed to be the major point of contact for foreign counterparts nor do they make statements on behalf of the Chinese government. A benefit of this approach is that there is only one voice speaking to the outside, while the drawback is that the Foreign Ministry may not possess all the necessary information, given the lack of a good coordination mechanism.

For its part, the United States was sometimes hampered by military involvement and emphasized direct communication and utilized the support of allies. In comparison with Chinese attention to responsibility, the U.S. approach demonstrates a strong utilitarian tendency, i.e., how to advance its objectives and maximize its interests in a crisis.[37] In the embassy bombing incident, the Clinton administration kept emphasizing the need to continue the bombings against Yugoslavia. In the EP-3 episode, Washington called its intelligence collecting activities as 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, and claimed the aircraft had sovereign immunity.

Even though the United States developed a more enhanced institutional capacity to deal with crises during the Cold War years, it does not always manage its internal players well. The role played by the military in both cases turned out to be both uncooperative and unhelpful. In the case of the embassy bombing, as one study concluded, "the Pentagon brass evinced a clear reluctance to share much information about the incident in the high-level crisis management meetings."[38] Such an attitude certainly added to the difficulty of crisis management. One U.S. member of the interagency 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."[39] In the case of the EP-3, as noted earlier, the release of a statement by the Pacific Command made it impossible to solve the incident through quiet diplomacy, and the decision to deploy U.S. destroyers only worked to aggravate the tension.

The role played by the U.S. military in both cases turned out to be uncooperative and unhelpful.

The U.S. approach to crisis management always attaches importance to direct communication with the other side. In the case of the embassy bombing, Clinton tried to talk to Jiang over the phone in an effort to calm the tense situation. In the EP-3 incident, the U.S. embassy in China contacted the Chinese Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, attempting to get a sense of the situation with the crew and the aircraft as well as the Chinese attitude toward the incident. In general, direct communication in a crisis can help avoid miscalculation and expedite resolution of the problem.

Finally, Washington is skilled at utilizing its international resources in crisis management by coordinating with allies and mobilizing their support for the U.S. position. After the EP-3 incident, for instance, Bush called leaders in Brazil, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom asking them to exert quiet pressure on China to release the crew.[40]

Preparing for the Future

Nobody knows when and where the next accidental crisis between China and the United States will occur. Every crisis has its own characteristics and may require somewhat different approaches. Some lessons to manage possible crises between the two countries can nonetheless be learned.

First and foremost, the two sides should come into contact with each other and set up a channel of communication as soon as possible. Given the Chinese system, such contact should be through the respective foreign ministries, not defense departments. Through such contact, both sides can exchange information about what happened and the current state of affairs. This will not only help each side get a grasp of the situation in the shortest possible time, but also help reduce anxiety and avoid unhelpful unilateral actions.

In addition, quiet diplomacy is always preferred to overt vociferation. Public actions usually only reduce the maneuvering room of each side and harden the stance of the other government. In contrast, interacting behind the scenes will not only allow each side to save face, but also reduce pressure from the general public.

Finally, both sides must keep in mind the broad picture of bilateral relations when dealing with a crisis situation. As they bargain with each other at the negotiating table, they need to resist the temptation to seek excessive near-term gains. During the bargaining process, each may take actions to squeeze concessions from the other. They must make sure that such decisions do not cause irrevocable damage to the other's interests as well as to overall bilateral relations. The crisis may bring bilateral ties to an abnormal state for the moment, but it is unquestionably in their best interests to work to return to a normal and stable relationship as quickly as possible.

Notes

1. Senior PLA officer, interview with author, Shanghai, April 2006.
2. 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), p. 356.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 331.
5. Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.–China Relations, 1989–2000* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 370.
6. "Text: U.S. Deeply Regrets Bombing of Chinese Embassy," May 10, 1999, http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/press/defence/archive/1999/may/dd1511.htm.
7. "Clinton Apologizes to China Over Embassy Bombing," *CNN.com*, May 10, 1999, http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9905/10/kosovo.china.02/index.html.

8. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 337–338.
9. U.S. analyst, interview with author, Washington, D.C., February 2007.
10. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 337–338.
11. Ibid., p. 356.
12. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "U.S.-led NATO's Attack on the Chinese Embassy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," November 15, 2000, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/bmdyzs/gjlb/3432/3441/t17317.htm#.
13. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 335–336.
14. Shirley A. Kan, "China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001: Assessments and Policy Implications," *CRS Report for Congress*, RL30946, October 10, 2001, p. 15, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30946.pdf.
15. Thomas E. Ricks, "Anger Over Flights Grew in Past Year," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2001, p. A1.
16. Kan, "China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001," pp. 14, 19.
17. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, p. 380.
18. Ibid., pp. 379–380.
19. Senior Chinese diplomat, interview with author, Washington, D.C., September 2006.
20. Ibid.
21. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, p. 395.
22. "The Chinese Side Summoned Again the U.S. Ambassador to China," *People's Daily*, April 4, 2001, p. 1.
23. Center for Crisis Management Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun* [On the management of international crises] (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2003), p. 245.
24. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Statement by the President on American Plane and Crew in China," April 2, 2001, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010402-2.html.
25. John Keefe, "Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident, April 2001," October 26, 2001, pp. 6–7.
26. Zhang Jingyu, "President Jiang Spoke," *People's Daily*, April 4, 2001, p. 1.
27. Center for Crisis Management Studies, CICIR, *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, p. 246; Robert Burns, "Navy Crew Held in China," Associated Press, April 2, 2001; Pamela Hess, "China Will Let U.S. See Spy Crew," United Press International, April 2, 2001.
28. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 396–397; senior Chinese diplomat, interview with author, Washington, D.C., September 2006.
29. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Statement by the President," April 3, 2001, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010403-3.html.
30. Yang Guoqiang and Wu Liming, "The U.S. Should Apologize to the Chinese People," *People's Daily*, April 5, 2001, p. 1.
31. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, p. 398.
32. Ibid., p. 382.
33. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President at American Society of Newspaper Editors Annual Convention," April 5, 2001, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010405-5.html.
34. Keefe, "Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident, April 2001," p. 7.
35. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, p. 400.

36. Kan, "China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001," p. 20.
37. 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.
38. Swaine, Zhang, and Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, p. 336.
39. Ibid., p. 337.
40. Center for Crisis Management Studies, CICIR, *Guoji Weiji Guanli Gailun*, p. 246.