

Bush's First Foreign Policy Test

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The standoff with China over the fate of a Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane presents George W. Bush with the first genuine foreign-policy test of his presidency. Undoubtedly, Mr. Bush will be counseled not to let the situation spin out of control and to restore "normal" relations with Beijing as soon as possible. This advice will reflect three decades of conventional wisdom about China. It is no surprise then, that with such expectations, Joseph Prueher, the U.S. ambassador in Beijing, finds China's belligerence "hard for us to understand and hard for me to explain."

But if Mr. Prueher had been listening to the man who replaced him as U.S. commander in chief in the Pacific, Adm. Dennis Blair, he would realize that this accident is not entirely accidental. "The intercepts by Chinese fighters over the past couple of months have become more aggressive to the point we felt they were endangering the safety of Chinese and American aircraft," said Adm. Blair.

Buzzing American patrol aircraft is just one aspect of China's more bellicose military posture. Over the past several weeks, Beijing has announced the largest

rise in its military spending in 20 years and repeatedly warned that America selling modern weaponry to Taiwan would cause China to emphasize a "military approach" to cross-strait relations.

Beijing's belligerence abroad has been matched by an internal crackdown. Not only has the regime's campaign against the Falun Gong become increasingly violent, but it is even willing to jeopardize relations with the U.S. by arresting scholars who hold American passports.

These aggressive policies no doubt reflect the beginnings of a struggle for power to succeed President Jiang Zemin. In classic fashion, the "power ministries"—the military and the Interior Ministry—are asserting themselves. Not only is Chinese succession politics often cutthroat, but the rising generation of leaders is notoriously nationalistic. Yet the leadership struggle only exacerbates the fundamentally repressive nature of the regime; such violence is in the nature of this beast.

Whatever the origins of China's hostility, the result is clear: This is a test of American will, power and principles, and

of President Bush in particular. How he answers it will be closely scrutinized by our allies and adversaries in East Asia. Indeed, the president faces an even tougher standard because he must overcome the doubts about the U.S. that rose from the weakness of the Clinton administration's Beijing-first policy.

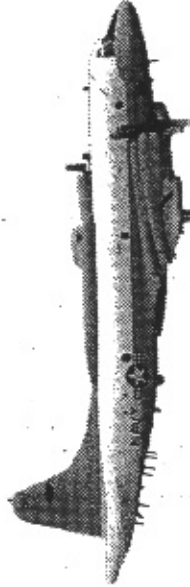
Without further raising the day-to-day

shelved indefinitely.

Although these may prove to be only temporary steps, their purpose is not to re-establish "normal" relations. It is not within the administration's power to normalize relations with the current regime in Beijing. Rather, the Bush administration must begin to wrestle with an uncomfortable but fundamental fact: China is a rising great power, which no longer shares a common strategic goal with the U.S. of containing the Soviet Union. China's goal is to replace the U.S. as the leading power in East Asia.

This ambition inevitably spurs China to intimidate, and to try to absorb, Taiwan. The island democracy undercuts Beijing's regime by presenting an alternative vision of how the Chinese people can be governed. And thus it represents the most likely and immediate source of tension between the U.S. and China. The administration should not be afraid, however, to approve the sale of Aegis destroyers and other weaponry that Taiwan needs to defend itself.

More broadly, the U.S. should not return to "business as usual" with China. Business-as-usual means increasing challenges to the American-led international order in East Asia. The Chinese communist regime quite rightly feels itself threatened by the strength of American power and principles—it knows it cannot survive if these prevail. Beyond the rapid recovery of a kidnapped aircrew and the safeguarding of sensitive military equipment, this is the real test for the administration.



AP PHOTO/U.S. NAVY

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friction of U.S. and Chinese forces operating in close proximity or even raising the rhetorical temperature, the administration can take a number of quick steps to show that it regards China's conduct during this incident as unacceptable. Ambassador Prueher should be recalled to Washington immediately, and any plans for military-to-military exchanges should be

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