

Tang Jiaxuan

REMEMBERING THE 2001 AIRPLANE INCIDENT BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES OVER THE  
SOUTHERN SEA

May 2009

*Tang Jiaxuan, China's foreign minister in 2001, provides this memoir of the diplomacy following the collision on 1 April of that year of a collision of an American spy aircraft and a Chinese jet fighter over the South China sea, with the subsequent death of the pilot. It is, of course, told from the Chinese perspective, with no concession whatsoever to the American point of view. The US Navy EP-3 was flying along the China coast listening in on military communications. It was within China's exclusive economic zone, but far outside the territorial waters. Other countries have the right of "innocent passage" through another country's economic zone, and it is an open question whether the US activities constituted innocent passage (the Americans and other major sea powers would say yes; the Chinese said no, but perhaps will say yes once they develop the capacity to do similar things). China sent up jet fighters to observe and harass the American craft, as was usual in such matters. The Chinese claim that the EP-3 deliberately rammed the jet, which is on its face absurd. Some accounts indicate that the Chinese pilot deliberately stalled his engine while in the path of the EP-3, with the intention to open up the afterburner and blast away after causing the American plane to swerve; but he miscalculated, and the two planes collided. The American plane was crippled and headed for the nearest field, a Chinese military base on Hainan island. The Americans claim that their communications equipment was damaged and so could not notify the Chinese of their intentions in advance; the American also claim that international law required China to allow the plane to land. The Chinese claim is that the United States violated Chinese territory, killed a Chinese citizen, and violated Chinese territory again with an unauthorized landing.*

*The ensuing negotiations centered on the return of the crew and of the plane itself. The main Chinese concern, from this account, was that the Americans "apologize" for their misbehavior. The United States was unwilling to do this, as it would entail an admission of wrong-doing and would perhaps imply that any further such espionage was improper. The Chinese, both for reasons of "face" and a way to exact respect, and also to dissuade continued surveillance, insisted on the apology, tacitly holding the crew hostage until they were satisfied. The Chinese side rejected a series of letters from the Americans on the grounds that they did not go far enough. Eventually the two sides agreed on language in which the Americans expressed their "regret." The Chinese chose to construe this as an apology; from the American perspective it was merely an indication that the Americans were sorry things had happened as they had, and were sorry*

*that the pilot was killed—but without assessing any blame either way. Tang notes in a sentence that almost immediately upon the release of the crew the surveillance flights resumed.*

*This essay concludes with assertions to the effect that a good relationship between China and the United States is in the interest of both countries and of the world as a whole. Tang notes that even during the crisis, the Chinese and Americans were able to cooperate on other matters. In diplomacy, he says, you fight when you need to fight, and cooperate when you need to cooperate. You can't refuse to fight because of the cooperation, and you can't refuse to cooperate because of the fight.*

## **A Change in the Atmosphere in the Southern Sea**

On the afternoon of 1 April 2001 I was in Nice, a famous city in the south of France.

I had just finished chairing a summit discussion meeting among in Chile foreign ministers from east Asia and Latin America, followed immediately by a visit to France, changing planes in Nice.

Nice is known for its sunshine and beautiful scenery. The weather that day was crisp and clear under an azure sky. After the long journey and tense meetings, both I and the comrades with me were exhausted and hoped before taking off again to have a little time to relax.

We were in the airport's VIP lounge chatting when suddenly Wu Jianmin, our ambassador to Paris, came rushing in. Without even taking the time to sit down, he said to me in a quiet voice that according to an announcement from home, that morning there had been a collision not far from Hainan island between one of our military planes and an American military spy plane. Our airplane had been destroyed and the pilot was missing. The country was preparing to issue a stern protest to the United States.

Everyone's spirits became more serious, the relaxed atmosphere in the VIP lounge turning cold at the news.

I asked Ambassador Wu to sit down and explain what had happened in detail.

On the morning of 1 April Beijing time an American EP-3, a military surveillance aircraft, had been carrying out activities in the vicinity of our island of Hainan. Two of our air force jets had been dispatched to keep a watch over it. At 9:07 our planes were flying normally at a distance of 104 kilometers from Hainan. The American plane, in violation of the laws of navigation, made a sudden turn, colliding with one of our jets, causing it to fall into the sea. The pilot, Wang Wei, was missing. The damaged American plane then entered our airspace without seeking permission, landing at

Longshui Air Force Base on Hainan. In accord with international practice, we took the 24 American personnel into custody.

Hearing Ambassador Wu's explanation, I immediately realized that this was a serious situation, a very sensitive and fast-developing situation. This was the first case of direct friction between China and the United States since the end of the Cold War, [\[1\]](#) and its consequences were the loss of an airplane and the death of the pilot. Most especially, this incident touched on major questions of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national dignity. It was extremely complicated and it would be no easy thing to resolve it in a peaceful manner.

There was a certain necessity to this seemingly accidental event. Ever since the establishment of New China the United States had ceaselessly conducted surveillance flights near our coasts. Military surveillance flights had become more numerous during the second half of 2000 and had been coming nearer and nearer to our territory. We had lodged protests about this many times and through many channels demanding that these surveillance flights cease; but the Americans were deaf to our appeals and continued to act as they pleased.

I told Ambassador Wu that this was a very complicated and sensitive affair. This would be the preoccupation of our foreign affairs work over the next period of time. The embassy in France should pay close attention, prepare responses, and try to clarify the true facts.

I arranged the next day to be in Paris and confer with President [Jacques] Chirac. After that there was a meeting with the press, and I would take the occasion to explain China's position.

As expected, I met with President Chirac on the afternoon of 2 April. Afterwards, as I left the Elysée Palace, there were lots of reporters waiting at the gate. When they saw me they crowded around, calling out their questions. The main question was what interpretation does the Chinese government have of the airplane crash incident.

I stood in the gateway of the Palace and patiently explained to them that an American plane had crashed into a Chinese plane; a Chinese plane had not crashed into an American plane. The Chinese pilot was still missing. The responsibility for the "airplane incident" was entirely with the United States. The American side should act in a way to satisfy the Chinese side.

After the interview I took a car from the Elysée to the DeGaulle Airport and got on an airplane to return to China.

The flight from Paris to Beijing lasted nine and a half hours. Because of the time difference, the flight took place

almost entirely during the nighttime. But in spite of this I was not able to sleep. All during the trip I kept thinking about things and my heart was all a-flutter.

At that time the atmosphere between China and the United States was especially bad. During the Clinton administration there had been instances of trouble between the two sides but in the end the relationship was in a positive phase. We had hoped that Sino-American relations would develop relatively well after Little Bush <sup>[2]</sup> had assumed the Presidency. This was because his father had a very deep understanding of China and he himself had been to China.

But once he became President, Bush made adjustments to the foreign policies of the Clinton administration, including taking a harder position toward China. In a television debate a few months earlier Bush openly announced that he wished to assert a new position, stressing that the United States and China were not “strategic partners” but were instead were “strategic competitors.”

In diplomacy, obviously strategic partnership and strategic competition do not have the same meaning. The latter even has the flavor of rivalry. This theory of Little Bush’s implied that the United States would increasingly regard China as a “competitor,” not as a cooperative partner. If that were to develop into the major theme of American foreign policy it would not have a good influence on Chinese-American relations. People could not but give attention to this.

The relationship between China and the United States is one of the major bilateral relationships in world affairs. How things stand between China and the United States will have consequences for how things stand in the world at large. Therefore, we needed to establish channels to the new American administration to be sure that Bush and his team would have a correct understanding of Sino-American relations. It was essential for the healthy and stable development of both countries that they have a positive pragmatic relationship.

On 14 December 2000 Bush was elected as 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States. As was customary, on that day Chairman Jiang Zemin sent his congratulations.

In February 2001, not long after assuming the Presidency, Bush sent a letter to Chairman Jiang Zemin. The letter had a positive tone, expressing <sup>[3]</sup> willingness on the part of the United States for dialogue and cooperation with China, with differences to be handled with mutual respect and frankness.

Chairman Jiang replied, once again congratulating Bush and praising the positive attitude taken by Bush in his letter. He hoped both would make timely common efforts to assure that in the new century the relations between the two

countries would develop in a healthy, stable, lasting fashion.

Toward the end of March Vice Premier Qian Qichen accepted an invitation to visit the United States and to make direct contact with the new American administration. When President Bush met with Vice Premier Qian he personally asserted that America ascribed great importance to its relationship with China. He said that he himself intended in October to attend the APEC summit in Shanghai and to pay an informal visit to Beijing.

Vice Premier Qian's visit achieved positive results. There was a warming of Sino-American relations.

These were the conditions at the time of the airplane incident. It seemed as if the relations between China and the United States were to undergo another severe test.

### **Hardness Meets Hardness During the First Round of Exchanges**

I landed at Beijing's Capital International Airport at 10:00 in the morning of 3 April 2001. I went to the Foreign Ministry as soon as I got off the plane. When I got to the office I asked that Zhou Wenzhong, the head of the United States and Oceania section to come see me. Zhou Wenzhong had been engaged in American affairs for a long time and had rich experience in dealing with Americans.

He gave me a detailed introduction to what had transpired over the past two days. He told me that after the collision there had been a high degree of attention from the Center, which had stipulated directions for dealing with the overall situation and with tactical matters.

According to the Central arrangements, on the day of the incident Zhou Wenzhong hurriedly went to meet with American ambassador [Joseph] Prueher, making severe representations and a strong protest. He stressed that responsibility for the incident was entirely with the United States and that the Americans needed to provide an explanation to the Chinese people.

The Americans took a high tone on the airplane incident. The atmosphere was intense and the Americans had no intention at all of taking responsibility. Prueher said that he could not agree with the Chinese theory about who was responsible. The Americans were willing to express "regret" for the loss of the airplane and of the pilot and were willing to help in the search for the pilot; but more importantly the Chinese should immediately "release the captured personnel and return the American surveillance aircraft." He even demanded that Chinese personnel not board the plane to inspect it.

Zhou Wenzhong refuted the American sophistries and rejected their demands. He stressed that the United States had caused China to suffer a loss. The American airplane had infiltrated Chinese air space and had landed in China without permission. China had the right to make even more representations to the United States.

The United States is always skilled at manipulating public opinion. At 3:00 in the afternoon Beijing time, on 1 April, six hours after the collision, the American Pacific Command posted a brief account on its website making the incident known to the world. The declaration demanded that the Chinese government, in accord with international custom, preserve the integrity of the airplane and the safety of the crew. Both the plane and the crew should be returned as expeditiously as possible. There was not a single word about the Chinese airplane and pilot.

The American EP-3 spy plane was at that time the world's most advanced electronic surveillance aircraft and was the only land-based intelligence and surveillance aircraft owned by the American navy. On the plane there were advanced spying equipment, including the world's most advanced automatic voice recognition system. The Americans were of course very concerned that such a piece of equipment had fallen into our hands.

On the evening of 2 April Zhou Wenzhong met with Pruher to respond to this coarse and unreasonable attitude. He explained China's serious standpoint. He cautioned that the Americans must act in accord with the truth of the situation, recognize their responsibility, and apologize to the Chinese side.

While at that time Pruher acknowledged that this was an "unfortunate" situation, he did not agree with the Chinese thesis that the United States was responsible for the incident.

After Zhou Wenzhong met with Pruher, a Foreign Ministry spokesmen publicized the content of the talks to the media and reiterated that the responsibility rested entirely with the United States.

In Washington Ambassador Yang Jiechi had a tense meeting with State Department officials, making stern representations and protests to the United States.

However, after two days the American attitude remained as stubborn and hard as ever.

On 2 and 3 April 2001 President Bush made two speeches expressing that the main American concern was the safe return of the crew. He also demanded that the airplane be returned to the United States without being damaged or tampered with. He said that the United States had already given China ample time to deal with the matter correctly. It was now time for the crew to be released and sent back home. He also declared that this incident threatened to ruin the

chances for improved relations between the two countries. At the same time, under the pretext of keeping the situation under control, the US Navy sent three warships to the waters off Hainan, loitering in the area of China's Hainan island.

The American attitude and manner made us very angry and naturally aroused a strong response among the Chinese public. Inside the country cadres and masses, as well as military officers and men, protested with righteous indignation against the irresponsible attitude of the United States. There were demands on the internet for demonstrations to be held in front of the American embassy. There were even demands that the Chinese government put the airplane crew on trial.

In view of the stubborn position taken by the United States, on the afternoon of 3 April Chairman Jiang Zemin deliberately introduced the topic of the incident in a conversation with a visiting foreign dignitary. Chairman Jiang pointed out: the responsibility for the collision is entirely with the United States; the Americans must apologize to the Chinese people and immediately cease all aerial surveillance along the China coast. Becoming even more serious, Chairman Jiang said that human life is the most precious thing there is. We are concerned to the highest degree with the safety of the Chinese pilot. He said he had issued directives that the search continue without ceasing.

The following day the major media at home and abroad carried reports of this talk. Chairman Jiang's speech aroused an active response at home and abroad.

### **Another Bout**

On 4 April 2001, prior to beginning a visit to six Latin American countries, according to custom Chairman Jiang Zemin held a simple sending-off ceremony in the Northern Chamber of the Great Hall of the People. Prior to the ceremony Chairman Jiang issued several important directives concerning the collision. He clearly pointed out that Comrade Hu Jintao should be in charge of this incident at the Center. He also said to me that the "Foreign Ministry should earnestly implement the directives of the Center, coordinating the activities of the various departments. It's necessary to manage this thing well. You must take personal responsibility for this."

After seeing off Chairman Jiang I felt it necessary to increase the pressure on the Americans so that they would clearly understand the situation and come to a clear decision. To that end, I met once again with Ambassador Pruher.

Pruher was a career military man. Prior to becoming Ambassador to China he had been Commander-in-Chief of the American Pacific forces. He had been appointed Ambassador by President Clinton in 1999. He was 58 years old at the time. He was a tall person with a military bearing. It was said that this Admiral had served in the Navy for 35 years. He was an aviator, and knew how to fly more than 50 different types of naval aircraft. He had rich flight experience. The

general opinion was that he handled matters calmly, seriously, in a businesslike manner, that he was good at distinguishing what was important from what was not.

In normal circumstances, diplomatic intercourse begins with a handshake and an exchange of small-talk, moving on to more serious things. This provides a relaxed atmosphere for the exchange of opinions between the two sides. But that's not how things were this time. Each side was uneasy about the other and both sides had a very serious manner about them.

I brought up the topic directly after Pruher had sat down. I said to him, After the collision Director Zhou Wenzhong twice made serious representations to you face-to-face. Today I want to go more deeply into the collision, giving you a full explanation of China's serious attitude. To this end, I'll explain the following four points:

One, the United States must take full responsibility for this incident. Two, the actions and attitude taken by the United States after the incident were mistaken and we are very dissatisfied. Three, if you want China to release your people, you must first apologize. Four, the United States must immediately cease surveillance activities along China's coast.

Pruher listened carefully to what I had to say. He then said in a serious manner: President Bush and Secretary [Colin] Powell hope that this issue can be resolved as quickly as possible in order to avoid damaging relations between China and the United States. At the same time he sophistically asserted that the incident had occurred in international space. Although the plane later entered Chinese airspace, before doing so it had sent out an SOS and had asked for permission to land. He even claimed that based on his many years of flying experience it was hard to agree with the Chinese theory concerning the collision and at present he could not agree that there was a responsibility to apologize to China.

He also said that the American side earnestly hoped that American personnel would have regular access to the crew. He demanded that the Chinese side release the American crew as quickly as possible and return the airplane to the United States.

I sternly refuted Pruher's sophistries. I told him that that an important principle in the handling of this matter is respect for objective facts. A mass of irrefutable evidence shows that the American side bears full responsibility for this. This incident is not a technical matter but is an important political and diplomatic matter between China and the United States. It is an error to treat this as a purely technical matter. The American crew illegally collided with Chinese military



personnel. According to both international law and China's own laws China has the full right to investigate them.

I said that in the history of Sino-American relations there has not been a single case in which China has committed an armed provocation against the United States. If there is anyone who is constantly guilty of armed provocations, it is precisely the United States. Two years earlier the United States had bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. Now it has collided with a Chinese airplane. For many years the United States has been sending airplanes to conduct surveillance along the Chinese coast, while China has never conducted any spying along America's Pacific or Atlantic coasts.

I took an especially serious tone, telling Pruher, first that we had consistently opposed America's activities; and second, that we were not afraid of them. The facts of many years past show that the more pressure the United States exerts, the more it arouses the righteous indignation of the Chinese people. I demanded that Pruher report to Washington the above representations and China's understanding of the incident and also hoped that he would play a constructive role in resolving this issue.

Pruher said that he would report every word and line of the principles of the Chinese side to the American government.

On the same day a spokesman for China's Ministry of Defense held a discussion, explaining with a great many facts the direct cause of this incident: an American airplane, in violation of the rules of air navigation made a sudden move toward one of our military aircraft. The United States should take full responsibility for this act.

Over the next series of days, the masses from all walks of life in our country expressed their righteous anger over the destruction of one of our aircraft by the American airplane. International society also made its own reviews supporting our position and criticizing the American attitude. The *European Times* published a commentary accusing the United States of handling the incident in a hegemonic manner. The American *International Herald Tribune* published an article saying that the carrying out of aerial surveillance was an insult to China. The *Australian* said that the United States should apologize for its surveillance activities, since these were a form of espionage.

### **Mobilizing a Search at Sea**

At the same time as we were struggling diplomatically against the United States, we were also conducting a search for the lost pilot Wang Wei.

Comrade Wang Wei was an outstanding pilot cultivated by our armed forces. He was a squadron commander in our naval air forces. He was highly trained and skilled in technique; he often undertook responsibility for major aviation tasks. He had received many awards for his meritorious service. In carrying out his duties he showed a calm courage. By 31 March of that year he had accumulated 1152 hours and 6 minutes of flight experience. In more than 2000 separate flights he had not erred by fault or negligence and had never had an accident.

Within one hour of the collision on 1 April 2001 China's military and civil aviation sectors based in Hainan had begun a large-scale search for Wang Wei. Altogether there were 113 sorties by warships and 115 by airplane, and more than 1000 by fishing boats and boats belonging to the governmental bureaus regulating fishing. More than 100,000 persons, both military and civilian, participated in the search, which went on for two weeks.

On 14 April there was a general summing-up. According to the analysis, there was no longer a possibility that Wang Wei was alive. That day the Navy's Party Commission issued a resolution judging Wang Wei to be a revolutionary martyr. On the 26<sup>th</sup> Xinhua reported that Central Military Commission Chairman Jiang Zemin had issued an order awarding Comrade Wang Wei the "Guardian of the Air and Seas" title.

The sacrifice of Wang Wei did not mean only that the motherland had lost an outstanding guardian of the seas and air; it was also the destruction of a happy and beautiful family. On 6 April Wang Wei's wife Ruan Guoqin wrote a letter to Bush demanding that he act in a fair manner. In his response Bush expressed his "regret" for the loss of Wang Wei and his understanding of Ruan Guoqin's sorrow; but he did not use the word "apologize."

### **The United States Yields and Is Forced into an Apology**

After undergoing our many sessions of rigorous struggle, the American attitude began to change and moved in the direction of reality.

On 4 April (American eastern time) 2001, Secretary of State Powell told the media that he "regretted" that the Chinese aviator was missing. That same day he sent a personal letter to Vice Premier Qian Qichen saying the American side was as eager as the Chinese side to work for good relations between the two countries and to put this incident behind.

The next day in a speech to the annual convention of the American Association of Newspaper Editors President Bush also expressed his "regret" for the missing Chinese airman. He also strongly stated, "We place maximum importance on our relationship with China." We should not let this incident affect the stability of that relationship.

In order to make the American side see the situation clearly, assume responsibility, and issue an apology, we conducted a bitter struggle against the American side.

In Beijing from 5 to 10 April, Director Zhou Wenzhong held eleven rounds of difficult talks with Ambassador Pruher. Once there were three meetings on the same day, the most meetings held on a single day. The key issue was that the Americans must apologize to China for the aircraft collision, for the loss of the Chinese aviator, and for their violation of Chinese territory and unauthorized landing on a Chinese airfield.

In Washington Ambassador Yang Jiechi was busy holding meetings with American government officials, former officials, and important Congressmen, hoping they would use their influence to push the Bush administration into apologizing to the Chinese side.

However, one matter of tension in the situation was highly prominent. American public opinion did not understand the legality of China's wish to conduct an investigation of the situation but held instead that China was holding the American personnel "hostage." Instigated by American media, some of the American public, especially relatives of the crew, became very worked up.

According to a report by our embassy in the United States, during that period the embassy and our consulates received many threatening phone calls. Some people organized demonstrations in front of our embassy and consulates. In the daytime one could see yellow ribbons wrapped around roadside trees. It is said that these symbolized a longing to see relatives. At dusk some people would gather not far from the embassy with lit candles and spend the night in prayer. Some people blocked the passage of cars belonging to our diplomats, crying out, "Why won't you allow our people to come home?" Some anti-China forces inside the United States worked busily to sabotage Chinese-American relations.

It was in these circumstances that Ambassador Yang gave an interview to the American cable news network CNN in order to explain the facts, speak reason, clarify the truth, and achieve an enlightened standpoint. He addressed himself directly to the American public. Ambassador Yang explained the situation in a metaphor that Americans could easily understand: A gang of people is constantly hanging around our house. Someone from the family goes out to see what is going on. The result is that one of the family's cars is wrecked and the driver goes missing. In these circumstances, the family has the right to conduct an investigation and the others at least owe an apology. This would be something "very important." He hoped the American people would on their own come to a fair judgment.

This interview had a positive impact on American public opinion. According to media reports, after Ambassador

Yang's interview on CNN there was an increase in the number of those who thought that the American government should apologize to China. Initially fewer than 20 percent agreed with this, but this increased to more than 50 percent. Some of the crews' relatives said that if an apology would bring about the release of the personnel, then the United States should apologize.

### **Six Drafts of an Attempt at an Apology**

The Americans began to yield under our pressure, but they yielded very grudgingly.

On the evening of 5 April 2001 Ambassador Pruher sent a letter to the Foreign Ministry signed in his own name. He considered this was an apology from the United States to the Chinese government.

We demanded that the Americans respond to three demands: The Americans must in ordinary English apologize for the incident itself, for the loss of the Chinese pilot, and for the unauthorized encroachment and landing upon Chinese territory; the Americans must admit that the plane "entered Chinese territory without permission"; and they must express thanks to the Chinese side for its good treatment of the airplane's personnel.

But in the first draft, the Americans merely expressed "concern" for the loss of the pilot and did not satisfy the Chinese demands on the other two issues. This was far short of what we had demanded and naturally we could not accept it. We accused the Americans of lacking good faith and pointed out that this certainly could not serve as a basis for negotiations. The Americans must apologize or otherwise there would be conflict between the two sides.

Seeing how firm we were in our attitude, the Americans had to soften their stand once again. They said they were willing to work with the Chinese side in deciding on the wording and in satisfying the Chinese demands.

On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>, the Americans sent their second draft. In this they expressed their regret to the kin, friends, and comrades-in-arms of Wang Wei. But at the same time they said that the United States could not apologize for this "accident." Given the American's stubborn attitude, once again we sent the letter back.

As the Americans kept on wiggling and squirming, unwilling to apologize according to the Chinese demands, on 6 April Chairman Jiang Zemin, then on a state visit to Chile, held another conversation on the collision. He pointed out that the Americans should apologize for having an American spy plane collide with a Chinese warplane. Chinese and American leaders should both take the overall relationship between the two countries into account in resolving this issue.

Vice Premier Qian Qichen responded to the letter from Secretary of State Powell, saying the United States should acknowledge its own responsibility and treat the Chinese people properly; at the same time they should discuss with the Chinese side how to avoid such incidents in the future.

China's firm standpoint and especially the repeated expressions of attitude by Chinese leaders meant an increasing sense of pressure on the part of the Americans.

On the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup> the Americans submitted the third draft of their apology letter. They indicated that this draft had the approval of President Bush and that there would be no further revisions.

After reading the letter we considered that while it was an improvement, it was still very far from what we demanded. Therefore, on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> we once again gave our opinions on the substance of the apology, demanding another revision. We clearly told the Americans that we would not accept the letter unless it were revised in accord with our opinions.

The Americans had no way out. They had no choice but to make revisions. They sent us the fourth draft at noon of the same day. In that draft they accepted the demand that they apologize to the Chinese people. But they also said that the Chinese should permit the Americans to remove the airplane from Chinese soil no later than 7 May. The Americans were still setting conditions for us.

We went over the American apology letter many times. Everyone agreed that while the United States had made genuine concessions, they still had far to go to meet our demands. They were also making demands on us and setting conditions, something not to be tolerated. We resolutely sent the letter back.

On 8 April Director Zhou Wenzhong held two rounds of discussion with Ambassador Pruher. He demanded that the Americans go further in revising the letter so as fully to satisfy China's demands without adding any further provisions.

Pruher promised to inform the American government of China's demands. That evening, the Americans sent us the fifth draft. This letter used weightier words in expressing regret, using the term "very sorry." The Americans also agreed to use the phrase "entered China's territory without permission," and expressed thanks to China for the treatment of the crew. It also took out the part about how China should release the airplane to the United States by 7 May at the latest.

That draft basically met our demands. That evening, the United States also asked that the Chinese side allow a few

further revisions in the wording and submitted the letter of apology to us. This was the sixth draft of that letter.

## **What Happened After Receiving the Letter of Apology**

After the acceptance of the letter of apology, both sides agreed that Ambassador Pruher would formally present it to the Chinese government on 11 April 2001. I accepted the letter in the name of the Chinese government.

After a bitter struggle we had been able to force the American government to accept our conditions and formally present to us a letter of apology. This was a major phase in that process. On the day I was to receive the letter, I deliberately chose a dark-shaded western suit of clothes. I clearly remember all that happened, as if it were still going on before my eyes.

Before Ambassador Pruher formally presented the letter, the American embassy had taken the initiative in submitting the text to the American affairs section of the Foreign Ministry to assure that the wording was consistent with what was to be formally presented.

Ambassador Pruher arrived at the Foreign Ministry at 5:30 in the afternoon, the appointed time. I received the American plenipotentiary in the vestibule of the reception room. Ambassador Pruher handed over the apology for the collision.

First of all handed me a letter to Vice Premier Qian Qichen from Secretary of State Powell, saying that Pruher had been given the authority from President Bush to represent the United States government to present in the name of the American government an apology for the collision of an American military surveillance plane with one of our military planes. [HERE](#)

Pruher then formally presented me with the American letter of apology. The letter said “President Bush and Secretary of State Powell express true regret for the loss of the Chinese airplane and pilot. We ask the Chinese people and the family of Wang Wei be informed that we are very sorry.”<sup>[4]</sup> The Americans also used the term “very sorry” in noting the plane’s intrusion into Chinese territory and its unauthorized landing. In the letter the Americans also thanked the Chinese side for its efforts to accord good treatment to the crew.

In accepting the letter I told Pruher that I took note of the use, two times, of the phrase “very sorry” [深刻歉意—deep regret, deep apology]. The Americans must understand clearly that the collision was a serious incident. The actions of the American military plane were a violation of international law and Chinese domestic law. It was in violation of the

5 May 2000 common understanding between China and the United States on avoiding crises at sea. It was a violation of Chinese sovereignty and a threat to Chinese security. It was absolutely necessary for the Chinese side to demand an apology from the Americans.

Despite the indignation felt by the Chinese government and people, from beginning to end the Chinese side acted in accord with international law and Chinese domestic law. Proceeding from considerations of the long-term relationship between China and the United States, we adopted a calm and controlled attitude. Also, the Chinese side accorded good treatment to the 24 members of the crew, in conformity with humanitarian principles. Personnel from the American embassy and consulate were able to see them many times. I have already noted that the Americans expressed gratitude for this in their letter. Now I formally notify you: We understand the desire by the American people and the family members of the crew for their early return to their country and their loved ones. In consideration that the American government has written a letter of apology, and with humanitarian concerns in mind, the Chinese government has decided to permit the crew to depart from the country after undergoing the necessary procedures.

After hearing me out, Pruher sighed in relief. When I saw his expression, I decided to keep at him some more.

I said, The collision incident has not yet come to an end. The Chinese and Americans need to continue to talk about the incident and related matters. The Chinese government and people demand that the Americans respond to them on these issues and cease to send flights through China's coastal territories to conduct surveillance activities. They should also take effective measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. The Americans must fully recognize the seriousness of this incident and treat China's serious standpoint with respect. There must be no mistaken conclusion drawn from the benign outcome of this incident. It is in this way that we can avoid further damage to the relationship.

Finally I emphasized that China would not tolerate violations of its sovereign independence and territorial integrity, we have always emphasized that relations between states, including relations between China and the United States, must be based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in the domestic affairs of the other, and other basic principles of international law. We pay great attention to Sino-American relations. Cooperation and friendship between the two is good for both countries and for the world. I hope that the United states will respect the three communiqués and the basic principles of international law and not do anything else that will damage the relationship between China and the United States. Rather, America should take a constructive attitude and promote the development of the relationship between the two countries along the proper track.

Pruher listened with great earnestness and did not argue back. He said he would convey the above expressions to the

American government and to Secretary of State Powell.

### **Permitting the Crew to Leave the Country**

On 12 April 2001, at Meilan Field in Haikou, the Chinese side turned over the 24 members of the EP-3 surveillance aircraft to the American side, permitting them to return home on a commercial airplane commissioned by the American government. This was two days before the western holiday of Easter.

In the treatment of the American military personnel, from beginning to end we acted with compassion and reason. After returning home, some of the personnel complained of close supervision and prolonged interrogation, saying we treated them as hostages. These people had a mistaken notion of their status. One must know they were not in fact tourists, much less honored guests. They were uninvited guests, people who had threatened Chinese security and sovereignty, who had destroyed a Chinese military aircraft, who had sacrificed the life of a Chinese pilot to American intelligence! We had the full right to handle them as we did and also the right to demand that they undergo investigation.

Be all this as it may, our conduct was rooted in humanitarian principles and also in accord with the consular agreement with the United States. We arranged for five visits from the American embassy and consulate and also saw to it that the crew were able to call home and assure their families of their safety. We turned over to them the articles of daily use sent to them by the American side and allowed them e-mail correspondence with their families. Later, in a speech to the crew after they had returned home, President Bush acknowledged they “were in good health, had not been injured, and had not received any inappropriate treatment.”

In the handling of the collision incident, the comrades in the Hainan government, especially the comrades in its foreign affairs section, played an important role. At that time the head of the Foreign Affairs section of the Hainan government, Comrade Chen Ce, acted as press spokesman and spoke with reporters on many occasions. He once said something very loud and clear that was picked up by the news media. He said: The people of Hainan welcome American tourists, but they don't welcome American spy planes.

### **Getting Rid of the Bad Flavor and Resuming Discussions**

Beginning in the middle of April 2001 the two sides resumed discussions in Beijing on how to handle the question of the American airplane. The Chinese delegation was led by Lu Shumin, the head of the American section in the Foreign Ministry. The Americans were represented by a Deputy Secretary of Defense [Wei-er-jia].



It is said that there was a difference of opinion on the American side concerning how to handle the incident, especially between the State and Defense Departments. There was conflict between the two departments over whose manner of thinking and acting should control the management of the incident. The discussions on personnel were under the control of the State Department while discussions concerning the airplane were controlled by the Defense Department. The negotiating team was composed of two officials from the State Department and military officers from America's Pacific Command.

None of these men had previous experience in dealing with China. They took the same attitude as they had when dealing with other countries. Some even made the absurd observation that at those times when an American plane had had to land in another country, the other countries would graciously return the plane to the United States; indeed, they would even fill it up with fuel.

When talks opened these people blamed the Chinese side for the incident and demanded that the airplane be returned immediately. The Americans should be allowed to send people to inspect the plane and make repairs. They also uttered irrational sophistries concerning the Americans' right to conduct surveillance along China's coast in the South China sea. They were making points similar to those raised by the American side in the earlier talks, even going back over matters that had already been decided. They were in denial about everything.

Naturally, we refuted all of this and also gave them a "re-education." Our side's representatives told the Americans that if they wanted to resolve the issue they needed to show full recognition of the seriousness of the incident and adopt a practical and constructive attitude. They needed to respond positively to the Chinese demands in a manner conducive to an amelioration of the situation. Otherwise, there was nothing to talk about!

After the Americans had toned down their arrogance we were able to move to deeper discussions on how to handle the problem of the airplane.

Director Zhou Wenzhong and Ambassador Prucher held three rounds of talks between 23 and 27 April 2001. The two sides agreed that the United States would send a technical team to Longshui Field in Hainan to examine the EP-3 Surveillance Plane. Afterwards, China and America would hold discussions on how to return the plane to the United States.

### **Unloading and Dismantling the EP-3**

On 10 May 2001 the American technical evaluation team made its evaluation of the condition of the airplane and proposed that technicians be sent to Longshui to make repairs so that the plane could leave Hainan in one piece.

Three days before this, the Americans had without warning resumed surveillance flights near China's coast for the first time since the collision. We immediately deployed combat aircraft to accompany and keep tabs on the American flights. It was really too much, under these conditions, for the Americans to expect us to agree that we would allow the plane to be repaired and then flown back to the United States!

The American demand met with our unambiguous rejection.

But after bumping into this wall, the Americans did not give up. They kept at it, saying that to allow the plane to be repaired was the easiest and most convenient way to arrive at a resolution. They said that they were willing to allow Chinese personnel to go along on the flight to prevent any resumption of espionage activities, and also that all the spy equipment on the plane would remain turned off, thereby meeting China's security concerns. The Americans also said that any so-called delay in the return of the plane would have a bad influence on the relationship between China and America.

We firmly insisted that the plane could not be returned in one piece.

We stressed that given the nature of the airplane, its return was not only a technical issue but was also a political question with a major symbolic significance. To allow the plane to fly home after being repaired would be to act as if there had never been any incident, and that was impossible. The Chinese people would not tolerate this.

We told the Americans that they had best drop their illusions and think of some other way to get the plane back.

We also pointed out that to link the return of the plane to anything else in the Chinese-American relationship was a complete mistake. The American side must take on a practical, cooperative attitude so that this issue could be handled in a positive manner.

Although the American military spy plane had remained parked at Hainan's Longshui Field, if the plane were not dismantled it would have to leave the country from the Haikou airport. But the American EP-3 is a large airplane. It is 35 meters in length and 10 meters high, with a wing-span of more than 30 meters. Whether it went by road or by sea, it could not be removed from Longshui. There are lots of narrow roads between Longshui and Haikou, and there would be no way to transport the plane unless it were dismantled. If it were moved by sea, it would be necessary to build a new

road just to get it on the ship. The cost of this, naturally, would have to be borne by the United States.

The Americans thought things through and finally decided that the only possibility was to dismantle the plane before moving it. They decided they would rent a Russian transport plane to do the moving. We agreed to this and said we were willing to extend to the United States the necessary cooperation.

Since the collision the plane had remained parked at Longshui air field. During that time there was some unusual weather on Hainan. There had been little sunshine and considerable rain, and there were reports of an approaching typhoon. The plane had been sitting forlornly on our field, losing some of its former air of arrogance. It could only await its fate of being emptied out and dismantled.

On 15 June 2001 the United States sent in 12 technicians charged with dismantling the aircraft. They arrived at Fenghuang International Airport at Sanya, Hainan.

The next day the rented Russian civil transport plane arrived at Longshui carrying tools and machinery for the dismantling of the aircraft. Because the needs for this were so great, the plane had to make five trips back and forth before all the necessary equipment was in place.

The work of disassembly began on 18 June and lasted more than 10 days, not being completed until the 29<sup>th</sup>.

While the plane was being dismantled, the Russian plane made repeated trips back and forth to the United States carrying material that had been taken from the EP-3.

It made its 10<sup>th</sup> and final trip on 3 July, taking with it the last of the spy equipment and the plane's internal mechanisms. An hour later the American technicians left Longshui field and the next day returned to the United States from Sanya. The work of dismantling the EP-3 was completed.

There was a small complication in the transportation of the plane. During the dismantling there was a small contingent of foreign reporters at Sanya to report on the activities. The two sides had agreed that the work on the plane would not be revealed to outsiders and neither side permitted contact with the media. But, strange to say, shortly after the disassembly began, the internet began to carry pictures of the work, with new photos appearing all during the process. Obviously someone at the field was sneaking around taking pictures. We were forced to alert the American team and tell them to exercise self-discipline to prevent this sort of thing from continuing to occur.

## **Rounds of Struggle Without Destruction**

Although the collision had an impact on Chinese-American relations, but the two sides had to take the long view of things and look to the future, to assure the healthy and stable development of the relationship.

During this period I also pondered how, in the aftermath of the good handling of the collision incident, to go further in improving the relationship between China and the United States. To achieve this goal it would be necessary to establish a close relationship with the American Secretary of State Powell.

Powell became Secretary of State on 20 January 2001. He was the first Secretary of State of African background in American history. I had wired him my congratulations in December, after hearing that his name had been proposed by President Bush.

Although I had not met him, I knew that he was widely respected in America. His folks were immigrants from Jamaica of African stock, and he had made his career in the military. He had served two tours in Vietnam and had been an assistant chief of the National Security Council under President Reagan and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Old Bush and Clinton. He was a four-star general. Because of his outstanding performance in the first Gulf War, he was a hero in the hearts and eyes of Americans.

According to the media and certain specialized scholars, Powell belonged to the moderate pragmatic faction in the Bush administration, with a positive attitude toward Chinese-American relations.

Although the collision had a certain effect on Chinese-American relations, in the larger picture the two countries shared common interests on a wide range of international and regional interests. Cooperation was necessary, so the two countries always maintained channels for consultation. So even while the collision incident was in the process of being handled, I had exchanged two letters with Powell on the question of Iraq.

Diplomacy is often like that. You fight about what you need to fight about, and cooperate on those things that require cooperation. You can't fail to cooperate just because there is a fight, and you can't fail to fight just because you need to cooperate. Both fighting and cooperation are means; the end is to uphold the national interest.

On 28 June 2001 the American side proposed that Secretary of State Powell and I should speak with each other directly concerning the situation in Iraq. This was my first conversation with Powell.

Now everybody considers direct conversations between leaders to be commonplace. But at that time "telephone

diplomacy” was not all that common. Most diplomatic communication took place by means of letters or through diplomats resident in the country. Telephone conversations between leaders were very rare. Therefore, this first conversation was considered to be something very important. I felt that I had to turn this difficulty into an opportunity and push Powell into giving priority to the relationship between our two countries.

After the exchange of amenities, Powell came directly to the point, launching into the question of Iraq. He sought China’s support for a complete inspection and hoped that the Chinese would take a positive attitude in the Security Council.

I explained China’s principled stand on the question of Iraq and then said a few words about Chinese-American relations.

I said to him that in the previous period relations between China and the United States had undergone difficulties. The Chinese side highly values Chinese-American relations and hopes to establish a relationship of constructive cooperation. In October there would be an informal meeting of the leaders of the APEC countries in Shanghai. We hoped that at the meeting our head of state and President Bush would make good preparations for Bush’s visit to Beijing, promoting a healthy and stable development of the relationship.

Powell responded to this positively. He said he agreed completely with my perspective and wanted to maintain close liaison with us. He said that the difficulties of the earlier period were already things of the past. He looked forward to meeting me at the ASEAN Forum for foreign ministers to be held in Hanoi in July. He also looked forward to accompanying President Bush on his fall visit to China.

When Vice Premier Qian Qichen had visited the United States in March, Powell had accepted the invitation from the Chinese side for a visit. I renewed the invitation to Powell to visit China after the Hanoi conference, and he again happily agreed.

### **In the End, the Diplomatic Solution Is Beneficial**

Not long after the collision, former US Secretary of State Kissinger pointed out in an article in *Newsweek*: The antagonism between the United States was accidental and temporary and not the result of a strategic choice. If the President and the Secretary of State could resolve this issue on the basis of ordinary human feelings and the realities of the situation, this would open the door to constructive opportunities. As a result of this “crisis” the two countries might establish a new sort of relationship on a stable and friendly basis.

In October 2004 Powell said in an interview for *USA Today* that China and the United States should have the wisdom to take the other side's needs and standpoint into account. Not only should they be able to resolve problems, but should be able to create a basis for conversations with the other so that in the future each would know how to go about resolving such issues. On the basis of this sort of paradigm China and America have been on a stable basis for the past 30 years and more. He later said he felt proud about how the resolution of the collision crisis through diplomatic means had led to a stable and improved relationship between China and the United States. [HERE](#)

Seen from today, the past two American Secretaries of State were very far-sighted in their view of Sino-American relations.

After he resigned in July 2006, the China People's Conference for the Study of Diplomacy invited Powell to visit, and I invited him to a banquet at the Yangyuan Studio at Diaoyutai Guest House. The Yangyuan Studio has the atmosphere of a classical Chinese hermitage-retreat. In the courtyard there are artificial mountains and ponds and inside lots of cultural artifacts. Powell was very interested in all of this, and we had our picture taken in front of the building.

For the banquet I ordered dishes to suit his taste. He was then 69 years old, but when I saw him he was light of step and full of high spirits. Obviously, the atmosphere at this meeting was much more relaxed than those when he was in office.

During the meal he brought up the collision incident. He said with great earnestness that the incident had occurred right after the Bush administration taken office. If the incident had not been handled properly, it could have developed into a crisis. But thanks to the efforts of both sides, we had been able to avoid danger. Both sides handled the incident positively and effectively. While there were still differences and friction between the two sides, but all of this could be handled well with a spirit of cooperation on both sides and the relationship could continue to move forward.

It has been eight years since the collision incident. Seen from today, the relevant departments of the Foreign Ministry, under the correct leadership of the Center, acted with skill in upholding principle and devising appropriate strategies. They conducted a rational, beneficial, measured struggle against the American side, protecting China's state sovereignty, national dignity, and basic interests. They had improved Sino-American relations in a proper manner so as to advance the long-term good relationship.

The manner of the handling of the incident shows that Sino-American relations requires a broad perspective, with a firm stance in favor of the long term. This is because of the crucial importance of the two countries in the international

sphere. World peace and prosperity depend upon a long-term stable relationship between China and the United States. Both sides must take a long-term view in their strategy and not let the relationship be spoiled by particular incidents. They must see that the relationship continues to develop along the track of cooperation.

There have been 30 stormy years since the establishment of formal relations between China and the United States. In January 2010 the two countries held activities to commemorate that 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I chaired the opening session of the meeting in Beijing convened for that commemoration. Prior to the meeting, in the rest area, once again I met Ambassador Pruher. His outward appearance had not changed much and his posture was still straight. We warmly shook hands and asked after each other's health.

I said in the farewell speech that there had been many problems in the relationship between the United States and China, including the collision, but through the efforts of both sides the relationship between the two had consistently been one of steady development. The bonds between the leaders of both sides were cohesive and personages from both countries of all walks of life worked together congenially. We should see that this good situation continues.

Let's look back on the past eight years. The two terms of office of President Bush, it can be said, were a relatively stable period in Sino-American relations. These eight years were an extremely important strategic opportunity for China. We seized the opportunity and focused our efforts on development.

China today is stronger than it was before and its international status rises day by day. Sino-American relations today cannot be mentioned in the same breath as those of eight years ago; nor can the importance of China today in American foreign policy be compared to what it was before.

Today Sino-American relations may run into this or that kind of problem. The policies of the American government toward China may require adjustments or changes. But if we build upon the basis established in the past and continue to strengthen dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation, broaden our areas of common interest, fully respect the core interests and major concerns of each other, calmly work on areas of division and on sensitive questions, then it is certain that we can propel forward the relationship and serve even better the happiness of the people of the two countries and the peoples of the world.

*Party Documents*, Nos. 5 and 6, 2009.

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[1] This would seem to be not quite true: there was also the allegedly accidental American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade 1999, which objectively speaking would seem to be a greater cause of danger and grievance than the 2001 airplane incident.

[2] “Xiao Bushi.” The term could also be rendered “Bush junior,” but the literal translation keeps some of the vaguely derogatory flavor.

[3] Qian, Tang’s predecessor as Foreign Minister, had served from 1988 to 1998.

[4] The Chinese translation used the term 歉意, which can also be rendered apology or apologize.