

China defies Bush's demand to release crew, return plane

by Michael A. Lev
and John Diamond
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BEIJING - Two days after an American spy plane collided with a Chinese jet fighter over the South China Sea, Chinese officials on Tuesday defied President Bush's demand that they release 24 U.S. crew members and return the damaged plane to American hands.

Chinese military officials did not let U.S. diplomats visit the crew or inspect the downed EP-3 surveillance plane, both kept out of sight at a military base on the Chinese island of Hainan, south of Hong Kong.

What began as an apparent accident in international airspace when the planes collided was slowly turning into a Cold War-style political standoff, with the president forced to address Beijing's government from afar by reading a sober statement requesting that the American plane and its crew promptly be returned.

"The first step should be immediate access by our embassy personnel to our crew members," Bush said. "I am troubled by the lack of a timely Chinese response to our request for this access."

More directly, Bush said, "I call on the Chinese government to grant this access promptly."

A White House spokesman, Scott McClellan, indicated that there would be no access to the crew before Tuesday morning Washington time at the earliest.

American officials expressed growing frustration with China over the lack of cooperation or communication, but they stopped short of accusing the Chinese of holding the crew hostage.

Bush sidestepped a question from reporters at the White House about whether the crew members were viewed as captives, saying, "My reaction is that the Chinese must promptly allow us to have contact with the 24 airmen and women that are there and return our plane to us without any further tampering."

In Beijing, however, U.S. Ambassador Joseph Prueher pointedly said China "does not have a sound legal basis" for detaining the crew or preventing American diplomats from visiting them.

"It is inexplicable and unacceptable and of grave concern to the most senior leaders of the United States government that the aircrew has been held incommunicado," Prueher said.

Without access to the crew, it was impossible to know where they were being held or whether Chinese officials had attempted to board the aircraft, which presumably holds a treasure trove of intelligence equipment and data.

The Navy on Monday released the names of the 24 crew members, who included Jeremy Crandall, a cryptologic technician collection seaman from Poplar Grove, Ill., and Marine Sgt. Richard Pray of Geneseo, Ill.

The plane, an unarmed sophisticated surveillance aircraft capable of intercepting telephone, fax and e-mail traffic, was on a routine mission over international waters in the South China Sea on Sunday morning local time when it collided with one of two Chinese fighter jets shadowing it, U.S. military officials said.

They said that Chinese fighters in recent months had become more aggressive about tailing American planes and officials had warned China through diplomatic channels that the flying could lead to an accident. The United States said it assumed the F-8 fighter jet was responsible for bumping into the much larger, slower turbo-prop EP-3, damaging its left wing and one of its left engines. The Chinese fighter crashed, and its pilot is missing.

The American plane signaled an emergency and headed toward a Chinese military airfield on Hainan Island, about 70 miles from the site of the collision.

In the hours after the collision, Beijing blamed the American plane for the accident, accusing it of suddenly veering into the fighter jet and then intruding into Chinese airspace without permission to make an emergency landing.

bassy in Beijing and a consular official based in Guangzhou traveled to Hainan Island where the plane landed, but there

was no word on whether they had been allowed near the airbase, and there was no information on the fate of the crew ex-



U.S. President George W. Bush reads a statement regarding the U.S. spy plane and its 24 member crew being held by China, from outside the Oval Office in Washington, D.C., on Monday. Bush demanded immediate U.S. access to the crew and plane.

CHUCK KENNEDY/KRT

U.S. Navy File Photo shows an EP-3E Aries II, similar to the one involved in a midair collision with a fighter aircraft from the Republic of China on Sunday.

China's relations with the United States have always been unsteady, with increasing economic ties offset by tension over human-rights issues and mistrust about China's increasing military might, particularly over the issue of Taiwan.

On Monday, there was stony silence from China's government and no indication that American diplomats in Beijing were able to have substantive discussions with their Chinese counterparts since an initial series of contacts Sunday night.

Two American diplomats from the em-

cept for earlier assurances from Beijing that they were being cared for.

Prueher said that according to generally accepted international procedures, consular officials would be able to see the crew and arrangements could be made to bring in repair crews to fix the plane. He said the crew and the plane should have immunity status from Chinese law, precluding searches or seizures or detaining the crew without U.S. consent.

But Prueher said he thought it was likely that the crew had left the plane. And a senior defense official in Washington said that the last communication from the crew after it rolled to a stop at Lingshui military air base was that armed Chinese soldiers were boarding the aircraft.

"It has been our working assumption since Saturday night that our crew was taken off and that the Chinese went on board," the official said.

Prueher expressed concern about the effect of the matter on U.S. relations with China.

"I think the downside potential if we do not resolve this well is fairly high. It could bleed over into other areas (of relations)," he said.

"When we don't have communication, things tend to fester and get worse."

While there was concern that the aircraft's sophisticated equipment could be compromised, a standard "emergency destruction procedure" should have been performed by the crew. The procedure erases databases and software that might indicate what sort of military communication the aircraft can intercept.

"The crew would have 'zeroed' the software on all the sensors, essentially wiping them clean," said another U.S. official familiar with the technology aboard the spy plane. Still, the Chinese would be able to examine and possibly evaluate the hardware aboard the plane, including the radar and radio interception devices, representing an intelligence coup for the Chinese.

While the motive for Beijing's lack of cooperation was unclear, experts said

the government might be paralyzed by argument among political and military factions about the most advantageous course of action. Possibilities for the delay were that the military wants to pry into the plane's secrets or was hoping for some domestic gain. Among other possibilities was that some Chinese leaders want to play to nationalistic sentiment by holding the plane and blaming the United States.

In its initial communication on the incident, China's government blamed the United States for the collision and suggested that it intended to seek damages or demand some specific reaction from the U.S. government, saying "China reserves its right to further negotiate with the U.S. side on the losses resulted in the incident."

Wang Li Xiong, a Beijing-based author on national affairs, said currents were circulating within government and public opinion to use nationalism as a political tool, and there were pressures from the military to find reasons to increase their budgets.

"There are these domestic pressures, but I think the government will be able to control the situation," he said.

While China's government was silent, nationalist sentiment and anger at the United States rose in Internet chat rooms, where nearly all contributors to a national affairs bulletin board attacked the United States for the incident, with some suggesting that the Chinese should boycott American goods or take retaliatory military action. Others hoped that China was using the time to dissect the American plane for secrets.

"It's time to teach the Americans a lesson," one writer said.

"The Chinese people should stand up to the Americans and make them realize that we won't be bullied," said another.

While the comments don't reflect the majority of China's public, they received the tacit approval of the government, which routinely removes chat rooms messages that are politically unacceptable.

Senate OKs campaign finance reform by 59-41 vote

by William Neikirk
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WASHINGTON - With a broad sweep of reform that could one day revolutionize American politics, the Senate voted Monday to prohibit political parties from tapping the rich vein of unregulated "soft-money" donations used in recent years to sway U.S. elections.

The Senate approved the soft-money ban by a vote of 59-41, handing Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who popularized the issue during last year's Republican primaries, a sweet victory after six years of persistent effort.

The measure, co-sponsored by Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., bars virtually unlimited contributions to parties by companies, groups and individuals. Since the 1980s, this soft money increasingly has been used as a source of campaign finance in addition to "hard money" contributions that go directly to individual candidates.

Even as the legislation went to the House, where it could still be blocked or changed, the growing prospect that the measure could become law raised concerns that the two national parties could be weakened and independent special-interest groups could be strengthened by its provisions.

Some analysts said yes, some said no. But at the very least they agreed that the Democratic and Republican Parties would find it challenging to replace the nearly \$500 million in soft money contributions they raised for the 2000 election cycle.

"You just can't take that much money away from anybody and not weaken them," said Jan Baran, a lawyer, election-law specialist and former counsel for the Republican National Committee.

Curtis Gans, head of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, agreed: "What it does is strengthen the outside interests at the expense of the integrating institutions, the two parties."

Some critics fear candidates will become beholden to interest groups that, barred from giving soft money to parties, would try to influence elections on their own.

Anthony Corrado, a Colby College law professor, co-chairman of the Campaign Finance Institute and White House aide in the Carter administration, said he doubted that independent groups such as the National Rifle Association, the AFL-CIO and the Sierra Club would overtake the parties in campaign clout.

"I don't believe the parties will be seriously weakened by this," Corrado said. He said that during the 1980s, when the Democratic and Republican parties had to rely on hard money to survive, independent organizations never gained the upper hand over the parties.

Thomas Mann, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, agreed with Corrado, saying that the two parties have depended on soft money for so long that they have neglected party-building activities. If the McCain-Feingold bill becomes law, he said, the parties will be forced to return to raising money the hard way, through seeking smaller contributions.

Twelve Republicans voted for the bill, including Sen. Peter Fitzgerald of Illinois, and three Democrats - Sens. John

Breaux of Louisiana, Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Ernest Hollings of South Carolina - opposed it.

Though similar measures have passed the House by overwhelming margins, Republican leaders served notice they will try to block the Senate version. Also some Democrats have reservations as the bill moves closer to passage.

McCain urged his Senate colleagues "to take a risk for America" in approving the bill. "I will go to my grave deeply grateful for the honor of being part of it," he said of its passage.

Yet opponents such as Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called the measure "fatally unconstitutional" and said the 41 "no" votes sent a message that it might not pass Congress.

The measure would raise the hard-money limit for individual contributions to candidates from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year. The limit for contributions to national parties would be increased from \$20,000 to \$25,000. An individual could give a total of \$75,000 to candidates and parties over a two-year election cycle.

Under the bill, state parties could still accept soft-money donations but could not spend any money on federal elections.

The bill also would seek to curb the influence of unions, corporations and independent groups that finance so-called issue ads that are little more than veiled commercials on behalf of candidates they support or attacks on candidates they oppose. The bill would ban the broadcasting of such political advertising by these groups within 60 days of a general election or within 30 days of a primary.

Several analysts said they doubted that such restrictions on independent groups would be upheld by the Supreme Court. If it is finally approved by Congress, the legislation is apt to be tested quickly in the courts.

Soft money emerged as a major source of funding national elections during the 1980s after the two parties found loopholes in Watergate-era limitations on campaign financing. According to Corrado, soft money raised by both parties totaled \$487.5 million in the 2000 election cycle.

Corrado said the Republican Party has an advantage in raising small contributions simply because it put the emphasis on building a list of donors in recent years while Democrats put an emphasis on raising soft money from larger contributors.

Democrats now will "have to target their resources" if they want to catch up with the fundraising prowess of the GOP, Corrado said. Agreeing with this assessment was Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University and an expert on campaign finance.

Baker said the ban on soft money helps the Democrats in one respect: With the GOP in control of the White House, it cannot use President Bush to travel the country seeking soft money contributions in the same way that President Bill Clinton went on fundraising missions on behalf of the Democrats.

The Rutgers professor said both parties have used soft-money contributions from big-money interests for so long to help finance campaigns that they "have become black-bag operations" that gather funds and pay for commercials rather than develop national policies.

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