

A Lost Opportunity in the Recent Spy Plane Incident

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Time is a continuum. It waits for no man—friend or foe. Once a moment has passed it is gone forever never to be reclaimed. With respect to business or personal decisions, how one recognizes an opportunity at a particular point in time is often the deciding factor between success and failure. So, too, with respect to adversaries, as in the recent confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China brought about when a crippled American reconnaissance plane was forced to land on Chinese territory.

As the world watched and waited many questions begged answers. What event forced the plane to land on Hainan Island? If it was an accident, who was at fault? At the time of the incident, was the plane in international airspace? Why was the plane's crew kept incommunicado for 72 hours? Was the plane sovereign U.S. territory or was it properly under PRC jurisdiction to be examined at will since it violated Chinese airspace without permission? Was the crew being held for political purposes or detained on purely administrative grounds? While there have been and will continue to be different answers and interpretations of the event, the question posed here is how did the adversaries use time and specific moments in time to their advantage during the standoff. It was not a question of managing the rhetoric of each side, as some analysts insist, and which was clearly impossible, but using points in time to one's advantage.

It is urged here that it was not a question of managing the rhetoric of each side, as some analysts insist, and which was clearly impossible, but using points in time to one's advantage.

In the first 24 hours of the confrontation, advantage was to neither the PRC nor the United States. Both sides were digesting information about the incident. During the next 48 hours it was generally accepted by U.S. and world opinion that (1) the incident occurred in international airspace, rejecting Chinese claims of 200 mile offshore sovereignty, (2) that surveillance operations such as the one in question were routine and of long standing, and (3) that to believe a slow flying propeller driven plane would play chicken with several jet fighters and in so doing jeopardize its mission was ludicrous. The next 24 hours were used by the United States to its advantage. The President made it quite clear the crew should be returned immediately and implied that American patience was coming to an end. To this point, the United States had managed time well. When the Chinese refused to budge with respect to returning the crew the moment had arrived for the President to act decisively, to make clear to China and the world that the United States intended to remain a major power in the Western Pacific.

Known facts favored the United States, as did public opinion. A number of cards could be played, together or sequentially, beginning with a direct request to PRC president Jiang Zemin to release the crew and make public his response or lack of one. Should it be negative, the President then could state

that he could not support an Olympic venue in a country that was holding Americans hostage; that Congress review China's most favored nation trade status, and in light of present circumstances consider in any and all Taiwan requests for weapons. A last card might be to recall the American ambassador. It did not happen. The moment had passed, and the time advantage shifted to China. American officials were allowed to visit the hostages and report that they were being well treated in terms of food, housing and medical needs. Their report was well publicized as evidence of China's humanitarianism. Pictures of the Chinese pilot's grieving widow filled world TV screens and newspapers. Concurrently, China demanded an apology from the U.S. for the accident and reparations for the loss of its plane and pilot.

America was now on the defensive. It could not reclaim that fourth day when it could have led from strength. Now it could only proclaim it was seeking a diplomatic solution, which freely translates into seeking a compromise. In football analogy, the first quarter and beginning of the second went to the United States. In terms of using time to its advantage, the remainder of the game went to the PRC.

After 11 days the crew was returned. And while it is true that the United States gave up nothing of consequence in negotiating the release, it is also true that the PRC would lose nothing for its act of banditry. It will remain in contention for the Olympics. It will retain its most favored nation trade status, and Taiwan will more or less get the weapons the U.S. planned to give it before the incident. Also certain is that negotiations about return of the plane, whether and under what conditions surveillance by the United States will continue, and just about any other topic suitable for Chinese propaganda, will drag on and on and on.

No matter what the PR spin, the loser in the so-called spy plane standoff was the United States. The world's only economic and military superpower was kept dangling for seven long days, a fact that will not be lost on the nations of East Asia. During the 11 day standoff, there was a moment in time when the United States could have made it clear that it would not be intimidated by a power intent on dominating the Western Pacific and all without a missile being launched or a shot fired. But time is fleeting and the moment passed.

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