

World View: Flying, spying and a new Cold War. Kyoto Caput

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Flying, spying and a new Cold War

For two weeks at the start of April, an American spy plane and its crew were held in China following a mid-air collision with a Chinese jet. The Chinese pilot crashed and was killed, and is now being hailed as a national hero, while the US plane was damaged and had to land at a military airfield. After a war of words, the crew were eventually able to return home, though the plane itself was left behind as a prize capture (and the US are demanding it back). The precise details of what happened in the skies are still not clear, but they certainly matter much less than what this whole incident shows about US-China relations and the possibilities of a new Cold War.

Many people may have been surprised to learn that the US was still spying on China in this way. In fact, up to a thousand surveillance flights, using aircraft packed to the rafters with sophisticated technology and electronic specialists, spy on China every year, mainly in order to find out what they can about China's nuclear capabilities. This is in addition to satellite surveillance, listening in to radio transmissions, and the use of American agents on the ground. It is widely believed that China has infiltrated various US nuclear installations and so acquired a great deal of knowledge about how to design and construct nuclear missiles. Bush's plan to build an anti-missile screen to defend the US is, at least in part, a response to this.

The incident graphically reveals the extent to which the US is the virtually-unchallenged world superpower. One can hardly imagine the furore in the US if a Chinese plane spying on American nuclear weapons had caused an American pilot to crash and then been forced to land in California. The US, however, believes it has the right to do as it pleases with regard to spying on other countries, and of course in capitalist terms it does have that right, i.e. it possesses the requisite military force.

A complicating issue in these matters is that of continuing US arms sales to Taiwan, the island regarded by China as an integral part of its territory. US-Taiwan military cooperation is also increasing. China's security needs imply that Taiwan not have the military capability of attacking or threatening China, or of mounting a serious resistance if China were to invade.

In fact, it was not in the interests of either China or the US for the aircraft incident to develop into a major stand-off. Although so-called "hawks" in both ruling circles may have wanted to engineer a confrontation, both sides have good reasons for keeping on fairly friendly terms-or at least as friendly as rival capitalist states can ever be. For the time being, China is a useful trading partner for the US, while China needs overseas investment. As the Chinese Foreign Ministry puts it,

"the development of friendly relations and cooperation between China and the US serves the interests of both sides and is of vital importance to peace and prosperity of Asia-Pacific and the world as a whole."

President Bush is due to visit Beijing in October, and in March he met Qian Qichen, the Chinese Vice-Premier, in Washington - Qian's visit was described by the Chinese government as "a great success". But as its economy grows, China will become more and more a real competitor for global power, probably the only country really able to challenge the US.

Trade

This all comes as China is preparing for entry into the World Trade Organization. Most of the potential obstacles to entry have now been overcome, but it is still up to WTO members to decide on the exact timetable for China's entry. Joining the WTO is bound to increase China's integration into the global economy, in terms of both overseas investment in China and the growth of Chinese-owned companies abroad (of which there are over 6,000).

Military spending in many major countries is rising. The "defence" budget for 2002 submitted to the US Congress is for the staggering sum of \$318.9 billion. China's military spending is not in this sort of league, but the figure for 2001 still represents an increase of 17 percent over 2000. The Chinese rulers, mindful of the effect that ever-increasing military spending had on the economy of the Soviet Union, will surely not want to get involved in an arms race or a new Cold War. But on the other hand, they will not want the US to have it all its own way.

One big difference between the current situation and that between Russia and the US during the Cold War is the extent of economic involvement in China on the part of American and other multinational companies. China has more so-called export-processing zones than any other country, that is, areas where overseas companies, often via local intermediaries, employ workers in sweatshop conditions, with tax breaks and little if any regulation on working conditions. At least 18 million Chinese workers labour in such zones, producing goods for corporations such as Nike and Adidas and working upwards of sixty hours per week for appallingly low wages. At the same time, many global corporations are expanding Chinese retail operations: Wal-Mart intends to open a further eight superstores in various parts of China this year, while the French-owned company Carrefour, which is second only to Wal-Mart in world retailing, will be doing likewise. Coca-Cola, to take another example, have enormous sales in China, which they will not want to see jeopardised. In some ways, the Chinese market is still relatively underdeveloped: Wal-Mart's total sales exceed US\$200 billion a year, which is about half of the retail sales in the whole of China. So there is plenty of scope for expansion. Despite the readiness to welcome inwards investment, though, the Chinese economy remains in something of a mess, with increasing unemployment, largely caused by the reduction of government subsidies to industry.

So it is not a matter of which plane flew in the most irresponsible way or of whether the US apologised or merely expressed regrets. The current global boss and its most likely future rival have good reasons for now to work together (or at least not in blatant antagonism) at the governmental and economic level. Yet the rulers of both China and the US want to maintain and expand their respective positions, power and influence, and spy flights are just one sordid aspect of their mutual suspicion and hostility. The vast sums spent on the military are just another indication of capitalism's waste and priorities

PAUL BENNETT

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The US Government has abandoned its commitment to the Kyoto protocols for reducing greenhouse gases. As the US is responsible for 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, this puts the treaty in serious jeopardy.

The announcement was greeted by the usual protests from people and organisations that support capitalism but imagine that it can somehow operate in the interests of human beings and the environment.

"Without the world's biggest polluter, the Kyoto protocol is in serious trouble," said a spokesperson for the European Union's environment commissioner Margot Wallstrom. Mark Helm, a spokesman for Friends of the Earth in Washington, DC said: "This is another incredibly short-sighted move on the part of the Bush administration, which is only concerned about wealthy contributors." (New Scientist 29 March.) No doubt there is an element of pay-back by the present administration to wealthy

political donors from the US fossil fuel lobby, the underlying cause however is the competitive nature of capitalism.

In view of this the Leader writer in the Observer (1 April) must have surely been struck by a particularly virulent form of April Fool Day madness when he wrote that the UK should combine with the EU to thwart US aims. "The EU with Russia, China, India and Japan could forge the climate change convention-without the US."

"'The President has been unequivocal,' said George W. Bush's spokesman Ari Fleischer on Wednesday. 'He does not support the Kyoto treaty. It exempts the developing nations around the world, and it is not in the United States' economic interest'" (New Scientist, 29 March).

The whole purpose of capitalist production is to make a profit, in order to do so you must cheapen production to get a bigger share of the market. The Bush administration is acting in the way that it thinks best serves US capital. They are being ruthlessly honest. Margot Wallstrom, Mark Helm, the Observer and their likes just don't seem to get it, do they?

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