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WARN WARNING: TOPIC: INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL, MILITARY, URGENT

SERI SERIAL: CPP20010403000083

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COUN COUNTRY: CHINA, TAIWAN, UNITED STATES

SUBJ SUBJ: TAKE 1 OF 2--Taiwan Reports on Collision of US Plane, PRC Jet

SOUR SOURCE: Taipei Chung-Kuo Shih-Pao in Chinese 03 Apr 01 p 11

TEXT TEXT:

["Special topic" report]
 [FBIS Translated Text] The collision of a "Chinese" jet and a US plane over the sea near Hainan Island has created a tragedy with one craft damaged and one lost, and is a most serious affair in terms of relations between the two nations. Judging from materials coming from various sources, this collision was a pure accident, and there is no possibility of intent. The idea of one side playing with fire is even more remote, and the most likely explanation is that the whole thing is an accident caused by a technological mistake caused by insufficiency in the tacit mutual understandings between the two sides. In the future, the key point which may impact relations between China and the US is not the collision itself, but rather the timeframe and manner in which the Chinese hand over the plane and crew.

Anyone who has some concept of what aviation is will know that when an airplane is flying at high speeds and hits a bird, the results are unimaginable. How much more so must it be then when an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane flying at 700 mph and a PRC

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Jian-8 flying at 1,800 plus mph. Such a collision is truly awesome.

Some analyses say that the PRC fighter intentionally struck the American craft, thinking to force the US plane to land on Chinese soil. Some people also say that the American plane made a sudden turn toward the Jian-8 as though it were a bicycle moving forward of its own volition. It is difficult to grasp the distances at which fighter planes pass at high speeds, where a tiny slip can mean a crash and death to the crew. No one gains an advantage from this. And this is not wartime, and there is no reason to make a sacrifice of oneself. Consequently, there is no case for an intentional crash.

The most probable situation is that the Jian-8 was harassing the EP-3 from below, and as a result its altitude dropped. The EP-3 dipped its nose suddenly, and the Jian-8 immediately darted away, but hit the other plane through clumsy emergency moves. In the flash of an eye, it lost its balance and plummeted into the sea. The EP-3 was leaking a large quantity of oil at this time and was forced to seek aid at the nearest air base.

In reality, US military reconnaissance planes have been flying over the sea on a line from Xisha to Hainan, following the border of PRC airspace for more than a decade. The PRC fighter was doing what they normally did, doing necessary surveillance and interception and even driving the plane away, all in accordance with the customary practices of international accords. A little confrontation -- you chase me and I tail you -- had never caused an accident in the past. Looking at the incident from the viewpoint of PRC fighter interception procedures and the demands of coordination with war technology on the ground, no reason exists for intentionally taunting the American plane.

The Jian-8 fighter plane is the PRC's new domestically produced, high-speed, all-weather fighter plane. It is principally used in defending air rights on the front line of battle, and can also carry out air-to-ground attacks. In 1992, the PRC navy and air force organized a Jian-8 squad, patrolling for the first time at Xisha, and over the subsequent eight years of exercises and training this squad has become a set fighter squadron, and is said to be the PRC's main fighter plane in terms of air and sea power. The pilots on patrol on the line between Xisha and Hainan Island are mostly old hands who are capable of flying in any weather. No one would anticipate any problem occurring.

In terms of the interception procedure, when PRC radar discovers an unidentified flying object nearing PRC airspace, the naval air forces dispatch two Jian-8s to intercept, with tower personnel in charge of directing. Everything is done by the book. When the alien plane is sighted, the Jian-8 lead plane on duty gives the order to the wingman to reduce altitude, and to first get into the best position for surveillance photographs under the foreign plane to interfere with it. The lead plane then flies parallel and close to the foreign plane, following tactics from the ground coordinator, and maintains close formation with the foreign plane.

Under the stipulations of the accords of international law, if a plane is flying over the open sea, both sides must maintain an on-alert space of 300 by 300 meters above and below and on both sides. The PRC fighter planes also operate under these regulations. But the problem is that if a foreign plane still wants to get closer to PRC airspace, then the Jian-8 procedure is to follow commands from the ground to slide horizontally past the foreign plane from above. This is the way two fighter planes "warn" each other without overdoing it. Then that Jian-8 returns to its two-plane formation and continues to watch the foreign plane. Under normal conditions, when the foreign plane sees the Jian-8 fighter's maneuver, it persists for a moment or two more and then withdraws. This is a tacit agreement between the two.

But why did a problem occur with this routine maneuver? Some analyses say that it is possible that the Chinese crew were having technical problems. Others say that the "Chinese"-US relationship has worsened of late, and that the PRC pilots had something of an emotional response and piloted the craft in an inappropriate way. In actuality, this is not very likely because PRC pilots are not only old, seasoned hands, but every move they make including their approach angle and their airspeed and altitude are all controlled by ground commands; the pilots might feel emotional, but that wouldn't be reflected in their flying. Moreover, the most common

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