

How World War III Could Start

Written by Nguyen tien think
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Similar confrontations are now commonplace. They offer frightening reminders of the infamous 2001 Hainan Incident, which was triggered when two Chinese fighter jets intercepted a Navy EP-3 spy plane operating near the Paracel Islands and Hainan Island.



One Chinese pilot maneuvered too close to the American plane and died when his cockpit was crushed. The damaged EP-3 and its crew managed to make an unauthorized emergency landing on Hainan. The George W. Bush administration brought the crew—but not the spy plane—home only after sending a letter of regret to defuse the international incident.

As geopolitical analyst Michael Moran observed at the time, “The drama of this aerial collision underscores an important and little-known post-Cold War reality: America’s surveillance network has grown so vast and formidable that in some respects it is feared as much as U.S. weaponry itself.”

The Trouble with Aerial Spying

Of course, aerial spying first became a cause célèbre during the Cold War when the Soviets shot down Gary Powers and his U-2 spy plane in 1960. The resulting diplomatic crisis derailed a promising international summit on nuclear disarmament.

Since then, the tempo of spy flights has dramatically increased, despite the availability of

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satellites to monitor the world. “On any given day, there are more than a dozen ‘strategic’ reconnaissance flights, supplemented by dozens of shorter range missions by tactical listening aircraft and helicopters,” reported William Arkin after the Hainan Incident.

Unlike satellites, intrusive planes trigger their targets’ radar systems, light up their communications networks, and provoke military command responses. That’s why American military leaders value the tactical intelligence they provide. That’s also why countries like China view them with such hostility.

The Risks are Real

The spy flight that triggered the Hainan Incident cost only one life, but history shows the risks can be far greater, especially during times of great political tension.

For example, U.S. spy flights along the Soviet Union’s eastern border helped provoke the tragic downing of the Korean Air Lines 7 passenger jet in September 1983, when it strayed into sensitive Soviet airspace over military facilities in the Far East. The loss of 269 lives was terrible enough, but the resulting propaganda barrage from the Reagan administration helped arouse fears in the Kremlin into that war with the United States might be imminent. The two jittery superpowers came dangerously close to nuclear war later that month when Soviet early warning systems falsely reported the launch of U.S. Minuteman missiles.

Military professionals in the United States and many of its rivals generally contain these incidents rather than letting them get out of hand. But accidents, miscalculations, and political opportunism pose ever-present risks of escalating small engagements into much larger military confrontations.

There’s plenty of blame to go around. But at the end of the day, what’s striking is that virtually every one of these dangerous incidents takes place as a result of U.S. military patrols or exercises near the borders of countries with whom we are ostensibly at peace, not while defending our own borders.

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