

Accidents and apologies: Understanding China's perspective on the embassy bombing
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Canadian newscasters probably think they're engaged in unbiased reporting when they call the bombing of the Chinese embassy a mistake or accident. Similarly, they probably think they're being accurate when they report to Canadians that President Bill Clinton has issued a formal apology. So if NATO made a mistake, and if Clinton has apologized, why are the Chinese so angry?

Our news shows claim Chinese are so upset because their news stations have denied them access to the objective reporting Canadians have been receiving, such as actual pictures of the outdated CIA map NATO employed to choose its target. Or, noticing that this explanation doesn't explain the anger expressed by ethnic Chinese leaders in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, they single out for coverage the most rabid sloganeers they can find, and create the impression that Chinese tend to be irrational hotheads.

It is difficult to generalize about 1.26 billion people. But one reason for anger, as explained by China's Ambassador to Canada, is that if an accident is sufficiently serious, claiming that it was an accident, even proving it was an accident, is insufficient.

Listening to Canadian newscasters one wonders how they would react if told that police officers had burst into their homes on a drug raid and shot their children in cold blood. Would they be comforted to hear the police officers excuse themselves for having picked the wrong house, and would they offer best wishes to the officers heading off for their next raid?

Coverage on Chinese TV of the three corpses laid out in a morgue, with the father of one of the dead -- a woman journalist -- sobbing over the coffin, has been described by Reuters news agency as the use of State television by the Chinese authorities to "whip up emotion". The Chinese must wonder whether our news media have become so numbed by the reporting of hundreds of civilians killed by NATO bombs our newscasters think of the dead just as "collateral damage" and not as fellow human beings worthy of some emotion.

But the Chinese embassy bombing is about more than the deaths of three individual Chinese. It is about disrespect shown by U.S.-led NATO towards China as a sovereign country. Accidents often happen when there is carelessness stemming from inadequate concern for the consequences. If you respect a foreign power, you make it your top priority to avoid "accidents" like the embassy bombing.

During the Vietnam war, for instance, avoiding "accidents" which might involve the Russians or the Chinese was a top priority for the U.S. military. The U.S. has lost that sense of priority. The Times of London made the point effectively with a mocking headline reading "CIA planners failed to check phone book." The map of Belgrade underneath had an arrow annotated by the words "Note to CIA: 32 Deligradska Ulica, Belgrade 11000" and pointed to the Russian Embassy.

OK, our newscasters might say, anger for accidents like this may be justified, but why was Clinton's May 10 statement of apology so poorly received?

The main thrust of the statement, if you actually read it, was to shift the blame onto Yugoslavia for having brought about NATO's bombing campaign. There was no promise that the culprits would be punished and the aggrieved families paid compensation. Expressing regret for your actions without accepting responsibility for them constitutes finger-pointing, not apology.

Blaming the deaths on Yugoslavia is particularly inconsiderate towards China because, like many non-NATO countries, China regards the NATO bombing as a violation of the most basic principle of international law: territorial sovereignty. To Chinese ears, NATO's "humanitarian intervention" is but an end-of-this-century name for what at the end of the last century was called "gunboat diplomacy."

"Gunboat diplomacy" may sound like Maoist jargon to some Canadian newscasters. But the term resonates among peoples throughout three continents who view NATO's attack on Yugoslavia as undermining the United Nations. They feel threatened by what looks like a regression to not-so-distant days when Western powers, unrestrained by international law, strode the globe imposing their interests, views and values.