

Apology Not Accepted

Was the recent U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade a regrettable 'mistake', as the Pentagon claimed, of a deliberate action, as some sources have alleged?

MARKO PAPIĆ

"I don't believe in accidents. There are only encounters in history. There are no accidents."

- Elie Wiesel, American Writer and Philosopher

In the spring of 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conducted air strikes against the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia as a response to the humanitarian crisis in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. On the night of 7th May, fifteen minutes before Midnight, five Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) 200lb bombs were dropped on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by a B-2 bomber flown from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring more than twenty Chinese citizens.

This paper will examine this tragic event by looking at the official U.S. and Chinese government documents that make an attempt to explain why the embassy was bombed. Of the sources used, the most important is the official U.S. explanation as to why the Embassy was bombed as offered to the Chinese government by Thomas Pickering, the Under Secretary of State, on June 17th, 1999 in Beijing. The other source is the Chinese response to the Pickering report that accuses the U.S. government of not giving a thorough explanation of how the embassy was 'mistakenly' targeted. Besides these government sources, articles written in the Observer following the bombing and other sources that have a bearing on the conclusion will be appraised.

This paper will conclude, following an in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned sources, that the ‘mistake’ theory offered by NATO as an explanation for the bombing is unsubstantiated and incorrect. The bombing of the Chinese Embassy was most probably a deliberate attack executed to prevent the Yugoslav military from using the compound as a means of communication with its troops in Kosovo and also to show the Yugoslav government just how far the United States and NATO were willing to go.

In order to understand the context of this event, it is important to clarify the political situation at the time of the accident. On March 24, 1999, NATO began to bomb the Serbian military in the province of Kosovo so as to prevent the Serb government from persecuting the Albanian population there. However, as the attacks upon the Serb military proved to be ineffective, NATO expanded its military campaign to include targets in the capital of Serbia, Belgrade.

It is important to understand the explanations for the NATO military intervention in Kosovo when looking at how China itself would react to the air war. According to Tariq Ali’s journal article, “Springtime for NATO”, that appeared in the *New Left Review*, the NATO campaign “maneuvered Europe into a war in order to prove that NATO had a permanent function, that it was the ultimate arbiter and could act alone, presenting the rest of the world with a *fait accompli*“. Ali goes on to present an interesting theory stating, “the very existence of NATO has been an anachronism since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact”. For Ali, NATO’s campaign in Kosovo had nothing to do with the official tagline that attributed it to the Serb military atrocities in Kosovo; it was rather a calculated strategic move to assure NATO’s continued status as the main military and political alliance in Europe and thus secure U.S. hegemony over European military and to some extent political decision-making. This theory is supported by the fact that NATO’s military campaign in Kosovo was never approved by the United Nations since the U.S. government knew that China and Russia would probably have opposed any infringement of national sovereignty and thus vetoed any resolution calling for a military campaign on the basis of humanitarian intervention.

The idea that NATO used the conflict in the Balkans to expand its influence is by no means new. Peter Gowan proposes a similar idea in his article, “The NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy”. He goes even further back in time to suggest that the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia were used as a precedence for NATO expansion into Eastern Europe as agreed upon by NATO powers at the Brussels NATO meeting in January 1994.

Therefore, Ali’s and Gowan’s articles provide a motive for the NATO campaign in Kosovo that would have made China extremely suspicious of NATO and the U.S. Not only would China oppose NATO’s campaign on the grounds that it infringed national sovereignty, something China holds dear, but also because of the clear intention by the U.S. to use NATO to expand its military and political influence in Europe.

China is a country that is extremely conscious of its history and the implications of historical parallels with the present day. Expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and the aggressive approach by which NATO chose to eliminate the United Nations, thus the Security Council, from the decision-making process in the Balkan crisis would remind China of the actions taken by the U.S. to intervene in the Korean Peninsula in June 1950 and in Vietnam throughout the sixties. The alienation of China from the decision-making process would be eerily similar to the way that the Security Council decided to invade Korea when China was represented on the council by the Guomindang government in exile in Taiwan. Therefore, China would be resentful of the NATO campaign in Kosovo because they had absolutely no element of control over it. While Kosovo is of no strategic concern for China, the U.S. may in the future use NATO in similar fashion against a territory of greater importance for Beijing.

China would regard the unilateral action of NATO as a direct extension of the United States acting as the sole superpower in the world. In his article “Current Sino-U.S. Relations in Strategic Perspective”, Denny Roy suggests that “from the PRC’s point of view, not only does Washington remain committed to its goals of weakening, dividing and Westernizing China, but the end of the Cold War has left America the sole superpower, enjoying even greater political freedom of maneuver without the balancing and restraining effect of Soviet influence”.

The second reason that would have made China look at NATO's actions in the Balkans with concern is the fact that China, much like Russia, regards sovereignty as the ultimate principle on which international law is based upon. Recently, as events in the Balkans and the Middle East suggest, sovereignty is being subverted by the notion that individual human rights are more important. China is extremely sensitive to sovereignty because of the fact that throughout history its sovereignty was infringed upon constantly. The moment NATO decided to attack Yugoslavia some conservatives within the Chinese government called for the Premier Zhu Rongji's trip to the U.S. be postponed as a sign of protest. Therefore, NATO's action in Kosovo may appear to China to be a sort of an international legal precedence for intervention in Asia and maybe one day even in China. An attack upon Kosovo for humanitarian reasons may precede a military intervention in Tibet for the same reasons.

Therefore, NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia would have been resisted by China on the count of sovereignty and because of China's opposition towards the new world order in which the U.S. uses NATO to control military and political decisions in Europe. Being aware of the political atmosphere surrounding the NATO campaign is imperative, especially when one considers the possible motives for the bombing of the Chinese Embassy by the NATO forces. After all, one must be aware that had the British or French Embassy been bombed there would have been no doubt whether it was a mistake.

The U.S. government was quick to call the bombing of the Chinese Embassy an error. James P. Rubin, Spokesman of the U.S. State Department, issued a statement on the same day as the unfortunate event citing the bombing as a "tragic mistake". The U.S. government followed its official apologies with a diplomatic mission to Beijing headed by Thomas Pickering, the Under Secretary of State, to explain in detail the reasons for the mistake in targeting that caused the Chinese Embassy to be attacked.

Pickering, in an oral presentation to the Chinese Government on June 17, 1999, cited three main reasons for the mistake: an error in "locating the target", an error in intelligence data databases, and faulty checks by authorities reviewing the target. His explanation was based on the premise that the Chinese Embassy was never targeted now was

it ever even considered a military target, as diplomatic missions never are. Instead it was hit by a mistake, NATO military command thought that the building housing the Chinese Embassy was instead the Yugoslav Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement (referred to as FDSP).

The first error that had caused this gross mistake to occur was, according to Pickering, that of mistargeting. Chosen by the Central Intelligence Agency as a target, FDSP was located on several maps, but nowhere was its location certain. Using several outdated maps (two commercial maps from 1996 and 1989, and one U.S. government map from 1997), a certain CIA researcher in Washington “used land navigation techniques taught by the U.S. military” to locate the exact geographical position of FDSP. Pickering, in his report, states that the technique used was incorrect, especially since it had never before been used to choose military targets. Furthermore, satellite photos never came up with any evidence that the building being targeted was an embassy.

The second error that Pickering cites in his report is that of flawed databases. None of the database sources used to check if the building that was being targeted was indeed an embassy said that it was. The report blames old and non-renewed databases for this problem. Old databases still claimed that the embassy was actually in its old location in downtown Belgrade, a location from which it moved as late as 1996. Pickering went on to state that military targets took precedence over any other types of buildings in databases and so the fact that the location of the Chinese Embassy was not updated is not unusual.

The final reasoning that the Pickering report offers is that of faulty checks. According to the Pickering report, once the target was picked it was never questioned whether it was the right target. Pickering based this point on the fact that military targets are usually reviewed on how to be destroyed most efficiently without causing civilian casualties and not on whether they are the actual objectives being targeted. However, Pickering did concede that once submitted to the European Command for approval the target package mistakenly received no additional examination outside of the Defence Department. The final failsafe, that of the pilots themselves, does not apply in this case since the B-2 bomber

operates at too great of an altitude and speed for the pilot to notice that the building being targeted is not a military compound.

In his closing statements, Pickering also responded to allegations that the U.S. targeted and destroyed the Chinese Embassy on purpose. His main argument was that the Clinton administration would never stand for such an act, which would go against their policy of reconciliation with China.

“This, the bombing was contrary to two critically important U.S. foreign policy goals: the further development of U.S.-China relations and the resolution of the Kosovo situation”.

However, it could be argued that those two reasons are exactly why the Chinese Embassy would be targeted. The U.S. could have wanted to send a clear message to the Yugoslav government that they were ready to do anything to resolve the Kosovo situation. Furthermore, it could have been a message to China to not get involved in subverting American interests in a region of strategic importance to the U.S.

Nevertheless, before one gets into speculations over what happened one has to look at the Pickering report in detail to see exactly where it is flawed. The Chinese government did exactly that when it responded unfavourably with its own report on June 22nd, five days after Pickering delivered his reasons. The political atmosphere in China was so bad at the time that no other kind of a reply would have been satisfactory. A member of the Pickering delegation remarked that he did not “expect Chinese leaders to endorse the U.S. version of events”.

The Chinese report claims that it was impossible for the U.S. to not have access to better maps than the three they claim were outdated. Apparently, the new Chinese Embassy building was marked on several tourist maps at its New Belgrade location and so it was highly unlikely that the American intelligence community could have made as great a blunder as they claim to have made. Furthermore, the Chinese report cites the statement issued by the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) that basically claims that the U.S. government statement “regarding the accuracy of NIMA maps is “inaccurate or incomplete”. The Chinese government report goes on to state that the Chinese Embassy was

a building “of a distinct traditional Chinese architectural style with such clear markings as the national emblem on the facade of the main building and a sign plate at the main entrance” and thus should have been clearly recognizable had the U.S. government used the “full array of the most sophisticated reconnaissance means” that the U.S. claimed it had used.

The second reasoning of the Chinese government is that long before the military campaign actually started the U.S. had surveyed military targets and diplomatic missions and in the following rounds of bombing there had been great efforts to avoid bombing of the foreign embassies. Therefore, there is no reason to accept the claim that the U.S. was not looking for the Chinese Embassy since it was not a target.

The Chinese report goes on to suggest that the claim that the particular technique used in procuring the exact location of the building was a wrong technique is false since in all other targets that technique was not used. Also the building itself was hit with five bombs with total delivery accuracy suggesting that it had been a subject of in-depth reconnaissance earlier. The statement that the database itself was old also could not hold since the U.S. intelligence databases are updated frequently.

The final point that is brought up by the Chinese investigation is the fact that the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and the FDSP were two buildings that had been visited on many occasions by the U.S. diplomats and it was highly unlikely that the U.S. intelligence authorities failed to consult these or other people with knowledge of the two buildings.

The Chinese government report that responds to the Pickering mission is remarkably thorough and concise. It responds to the weak points in the argument of Pickering without resorting to vague motives on why the Chinese Embassy would have been bombed by NATO or by getting into anti-American propaganda. It can be said that it employs common sense when looking at the reasons that were offered by the U.S. government and while it certainly provides grounds for dismissing Pickering’s report as flawed it never suggests itself why the Chinese Embassy was bombed or why it would be bombed. However, an article written by John Sweeney, Jens Holsoe and Ed Vulliamy of the Observer on October 17, 1999 provides some interesting theories on this subject.

When evaluating sources, articles from daily media usually come up as the most unreliable because of their bias and commercial factor. However, in this case when an event has occurred only recently there is really no other choice, but to turn to investigative journalism for information. After all, it is only in this media that something new and provocative may come up. The government sources used so far were mostly bland and contrived so as not to insult or provoke the other party. The Observer, on the other hand, presents an alternative reasoning behind the bombing of the Chinese Embassy and it is from a relatively unbiased source since the Observer is a British and not American or Chinese publication.

The article first came out on October 17th, claiming that NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy because it found out that the Chinese Embassy was being used to transmit Yugoslav army communications. The NATO electronic intelligence (Elint) detected signals coming from the Chinese Embassy, signals used by the Yugoslav Army headquarters in Belgrade to communicate with its troops in Kosovo and other parts of Serbia. The U.S. government denied this speculation and went on to claim that a mistake within the CIA was the cause for the mistake. In an article in the Washington Post on April 9, 2000, Vernon Loeb states that CIA Director George J. Tenet “took disciplinary action” and fired the “individual” that Pickering notes as having made the mistake with land navigation. While the Washington Post article claims that the U.S. government considered the matter closed, it never discussed the findings brought about in the article in the Observer. As a matter of fact, no U.S. governmental source ever tried to tackle the theory proposed by the investigative journalists in the British newspaper.

The Observer article cites three main NATO officers as sources, one a flight controller in Naples, one an intelligence officer monitoring Yugoslav radio traffic in Macedonia, and a senior headquarters officer in Brussels. These sources all confirmed that it was a well-known fact “that the Chinese Embassy was acting as a rebroadcasting station for the Yugoslav army after alliance jets had successfully silenced Milosevic’s own transmitters”. The article goes on to state that the Chinese were also monitoring cruise missile attacks and were probably gathering information on the U.S. military strategy and technology. The

intelligence office in Macedonia was quoted in the Observer as stating: “NATO had been hunting the radio transmitters in Belgrade. When the President’s [Milosevic's] residence was bombed on 23rd April, the signals disappeared for 24 hours. When they came on the air again, we discovered they came from the embassy compound”. The article also points back to the NIMA statement that its maps were incorrect and even quotes a source from that U.S. government organization stating that the “wrong map story was a damned lie”.

The Observer also presents another interesting aspect. The CIA and other NATO intelligence agencies had been listening and spying on the Chinese Embassy since it had moved to its new location. It is highly unlikely that the very people who were spying on the Embassy could mistake it for something else and then bomb it. The NATO source in Naples goes even further stating that there was a map in use that clearly had the Chinese Embassy marked on its actual location.

The article then goes on to suggest some theories as to why the Chinese were actually helping the Yugoslav Army. The obvious reason would be because they wanted to gather information about the U.S. military strategy and also to help humiliate the U.S. military effort. However, the Observer also notes that the shooting down of a Stealth fighter by the Yugoslav military could have been a bargaining tool used by the Yugoslav military to get the Chinese to help them. The Chinese would go through a great deal, probably including getting their embassy bombed, in order to get their hands on some Stealth material used in the Stealth fighter.

Furthermore, the article states that the two of the three Chinese nationals killed in the incident were actually intelligence personnel. It also cites the Chinese military attache, Ven Bo Koy, who was injured in the attack, as saying that “only hours before the attack, the embassy was monitoring incoming cruise missiles in order to develop counter-measures”.

One month after the controversial article came out another one was published by the same authors in the Observer. It basically stated the same things as the earlier one, but it also added a few more points and revelations. First of all, it stated that correct co-ordinates of the Chinese Embassy were in NATO’s air target computer at the Combined Air Operations Centre at Vicenza in northern Italy. Also, the part of the Embassy hit was the part used by

the military attache, the rest of the Embassy that held the living quarters of the ambassador and his deputies were not even scratched. This begs the question, “why did the Americans use the most precise weapons in their arsenal to hit the right end of the wrong building, leaving the ambassador’s flower pots untouched”?

Furthermore, the article tries to answer the motive behind the attack. It quotes an unidentified NATO officer saying, “the aim was to send a clear message to Milosevic that he should not use outside help in the shape of the Chinese”.

The Observer articles are filled with interesting theories, but unfortunately they do not give clear indication of who their sources are. The CIA and the U.S. government story are highly believable if extremely unlikely. The coincidence that the U.S. story asks us to accept is so great that by default it is no longer a coincidence. What can be ascertained is that the Chinese Embassy was most likely used by the Chinese to monitor the progress of the U.S. military and also it would seem to help the Yugoslav army coordinate its efforts in resisting the NATO air strikes. This gives the “mistake” the motive that it needs to become a premeditated attack. The U.S. story itself is so full of holes, as the Chinese government report clearly illustrates, that the moment one can find a motive as to why the Americans would attack the Chinese Embassy the U.S. story is no longer acceptable.

However, one question still remains: would the U.S. risk retaliation by the Chinese government so as to strike a crushing blow to the Yugoslav army, which was already succumbing under the pressure, and so as to show China that it should stay out of its back yard? The answer is most probably yes because if China was really helping Yugoslavia and at the same time spying on the Americans they would know exactly why their embassy was bombed and would not retaliate other than to create a lot of diplomatic fuss about the whole incident. One could argue that the Chinese government did retaliate by “accidentally” crashing one of its fighter jets into a U.S. spy plane, but that is a theory worthy of its own essay.

One could also argue that the goal of defeating the Yugoslav army could not have been a greater objective for the U.S. than the normalization of relations with China, which clearly has its economic advantages. However, the military operation in Kosovo was more

than just a humanitarian intervention as was already discussed. The repercussions of the NATO campaign in Kosovo would be felt for years to come as the very future of NATO's existence hinged on the success of the air-campaign. NATO brings to the U.S. more than just military and political hegemony over Europe and the European Union. It also brings a great economical prosperity as the European countries are forced to purchase American weaponry in order to be acceptable to NATO standards. Relations with China are important, but Europe is a far more important region for the U.S. and with the rise of the European Union the U.S. really has only NATO to exert its control over the region. Meanwhile, would an incident for which the U.S. clearly apologized hurt the relations with China that were icy anyways? A more important question is who needs China to get into WTO more, U.S. or China itself? The answer is clearly China since the bombing incident simply stalled the process.

In the aftermath of the bombing one can see the rise of nationalism in China. Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rose tackle this rise of nationalism in "The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy". They see the increase in popularity of nationalism as a by-product of Marxism-Leninism fading as a "legitimizing rubric". They also make a claim that the old conservatives in the Communist party are being revitalized by incidents such as the embassy bombing since they draw their roots to the time when the Cold War was in full swing.

The result of the rise of nationalism in China is that the people are becoming increasingly xenophobic and the recurrence of the Boxer phenomenon may eventually become the driving force behind Chinese foreign policy. A survey taken only months following the bombing of the Chinese Embassy noted that the United States was the least favourable nation in the eyes of the Chinese. The survey was taken among students of various Chinese universities. This is a significant detail since the least favourable country to the Chinese was usually Japan, a country that committed countless atrocities against the Chinese in the thirties, including the Nanjing Massacre of 1937.

Another important aspect of the rise of nationalism is that it is the rise of nationalism amongst the elites and students and not amongst the masses, per say. Following the bombing

of the Chinese Embassy, the government provided buses for students to go and protest the atrocious act in front of the American Embassy. This is an example of the Chinese government using a sudden resurgence of nationalism for its own goals, which may become a new trend in Chinese foreign policy. Interestingly enough, the same government that provided the buses trampled over its students only 10 years ago from that date.

The bombing of the Chinese Embassy has certainly contributed to the rise of nationalism in China. While this in itself is not the subject matter of this paper it is still an aspect worthy of mention. The conclusion on whether the bombing was a mistake is the subject matter, however, and now that all the facts are laid one can't but still remain doubtful of the correct answer to the question of whether the bombing of the Chinese Embassy was indeed a mistake or a deliberate action. Still, as this paper has argued, the most likely conclusion that one can draw from the facts available to us at this time is that the bombing was indeed a premeditated attack by the U.S. The most probable motive was the fact that the Yugoslav army was receiving considerable intelligence from the Chinese and that that was putting the whole operation in danger. Also, the alternative response as offered by the CIA and the U.S. government is full of holes and requires of one to accept to accept the fact that incredible coincidences occur in the world of GPS satellites and trillion-dollar military budgets.

Nevertheless, this paper reaches the conclusion with little certainty and much doubt, for as Francis Bacon said, "if a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ali, Tariq. "Springtime for NATO". *New Left Review* 234 (March – April 1999): 62 – 72.
- Chinese Embassy Bombing. May 16, 1999. National Imagery and Mapping Agency, April 1, 2002. <<http://164.214.2.59/general/embassy.html>>
- Chinese Government Emphasizes that the US Side Must Give.... June 22, 1999. Federation of American Scientists, April 1, 2002.
<<http://www.fas.org/news/china/1999/0622.htm>>
- CIA Fires Officer Over Embassy Bombing. April 9, 2000. *Washingtonpost.com*, April 1, 2002. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=nation&contentId=A40069-2000Apr8>>
- David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.
- Gao, Mobo C.F. "Sino-US Love and Hate Relations". *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 30.4 (2000): 547 – 561.
- Gowan, Peter. "The NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy". *New Left Review* 234 (March – April 1999): 94 – 109.
- NATO Bombed Chinese Deliberately. October 17, 1999. *Guardian.co.uk*, April 1, 2002.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Kosovo/Story/0,2763,203214,00.html>>
- Pickering, Thomas. Under Secretary of State Oral Presentation to the Chinese.... June 17, 1999. The US State Department Home Page, April 1, 2002.
<http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1999/990617_pickering_emb.html>
- Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro. *The Coming Conflict with China*. New York: Borzoi, 1997.
- Rourke, John T. *International Politics on the World Stage*. New York: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2001.
- Roy, Denny. "Current Sino-US Relations in Strategic Perspective". *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20.3 (1998): 225 – 239.
- Serbs Remember NATO Bombing. March 24, 2002. *CNN.com*, April 1, 2002.
<<http://europe.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/03/24/yugo.rally/index.html>>

Sutter, Robert G. *US Policy Toward China, An Introduction to the Role of Interest Groups*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

Truth Behind America's Raid on Belgrade. November 28, 1999. [Guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), April 1, 2002. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,3935955,00.html>>

US Department of State Office of the Spokesman Press Statement. May 8, 1999. The US State Department Home Page, April 1, 2002.

<<http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/statements/1999/ps990508.html>>

***Marko Papić** is in his fourth and final year of a Honours Political Science and History Major. He is an international student from Belgrade, Serbia who specializes in International Relations theory, Eastern European security studies as well as comparative political economy. This year he served as the Editor-in-Chief of the UBC Journal of International Affairs and as a student initiator and lecturer in a Political Science seminar on Diplomacy and Negotiation. He hopes to continue his education by pursuing a Masters in Political Science.

****Note on Internet Sources:** The Internet sources used in this paper all either government sites (State Department, NIMA) or newspaper agency sites that are in fact non-internet based news agencies that only use internet sites to display their articles (The Observer, Washington Post).

*****Note from the Media Editor:** The print version of this paper originally came with endnotes written at the end of piece; however, none of these endnotes were actually incorporated into the written format of the paper, making it difficult to assume where they would have been originally placed. They have been left out as a result.