

The Chinese balloon over the USA

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On 2 February, Pentagon officials announced that an object they described as a “Chinese intelligence balloon” had been spotted over US territory. It reportedly entered American airspace over Alaska on 28 January. Later, after transiting Canadian airspace, it changed course on 31 January and again found itself in US airspace over Idaho. On 1 February, it flew over Montana, which is home to Malmstrom AFB, one of three US Air Force bases with intercontinental ballistic missiles. President Joe Biden decided not to shoot the aerostat down over land due to the risk of damage on the ground. On 2 February, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken cancelled his visit to China, which had been scheduled for the following day, and said that sending the balloon over US territory was “an irresponsible act ... detrimental to substantive discussions”. On 3 February, the Chinese government admitted that the balloon originated in the PRC and expressed regret over the situation. They claimed that it was a civilian device, used mainly for weather research, that had deviated from its planned course.

One day later, the balloon was shot down over the ocean off South Carolina coast within American airspace. US Navy divers are now searching for its remains. Beijing protested against the “shooting down of a civilian” aircraft, and stipulated that it could claim compensation on behalf of the company operating it. On 6 February, a spokesperson for China’s foreign ministry admitted that a second balloon detected over Colombia over the weekend was also an airship originating in the PRC which had “entered Latin American and Caribbean airspace due to force majeure”.

Commentary

- Pentagon officials confirmed during a press briefing that similar incidents with Chinese surveillance balloons involved had occurred “during this and previous administrations”. Modern superpressure stratospheric balloons can be precisely navigated in the upper atmosphere and can hold station for months. The media and expert circles are now speculating that this type of aircraft could be used for purposes other than spying, such as carrying weapons of mass destruction (especially as, since they operate below the ceiling that is defined as the lower boundary of outer space, the international ban on the deployment of nuclear weapons in space does not apply to them). Their physical properties, and the low profile of the suspended cargo and the altitude at which they operate (usually over 30,000 m above sea level), make them difficult to spot by radar and invisible to observers on the ground. However, according to information from the US Department of Defence, the Chinese object was at about 18,000 meters above sea level when it was downed. The balloon could be seen from the ground because it was flying at

such a low altitude. We can only speculate whether its low position was due to failure, human error or the deliberate action by elements of the Chinese regime which seek to escalate tension in Sino-American relations. What it did beyond any doubt was force the Pentagon to publicly admit that the incident had taken place. Previously, they most likely did not want to reveal their ability to track such objects in the stratosphere. Washington's lack of reaction to similar missions in the past may have prompted the Chinese leaders to treat this as a routine mission, and this type of operation could not have taken place without their consent. It will be possible to verify whether the Chinese balloon was used for spying only after examining its debris when it is recovered.

- Beijing's initial reaction to the situation was quite moderate: it admitted that the object had originated in the PRC and issued an apology. However, the cancellation of Blinken's visit and the growing pressure from the Republican opposition to shoot down the airship also led to a hardening of China's rhetoric. It seems that this change was influenced by the enthusiastic reaction from part of the Chinese public, in whose opinion sending an aircraft over the United States was a success. On the other hand, it might have also been triggered by Beijing's fear that if the Americans shot down the balloon and recovered its remains, Washington could present evidence proving that this was an espionage mission. Therefore, it can be assumed that the accusations that the United States violated international law by shooting down a civilian aircraft, as the Chinese side has claimed, are part of a pre-emptive strategy.
- This is a sensitive time in China-US relations. Despite the intensifying rivalry, the two countries are now seeking to prevent an uncontrolled degradation of bilateral relations. The meeting between Xi Jinping and Biden and the resumption of dialogue last November are just a few examples of such efforts (for more detail, see '[A tactical pause in relations with the West: China plays on hopes for peace](#)'). The two sides planned to discuss the most pressing problems in bilateral relations during Blinken's visit to Beijing, which was cancelled as a consequence of the balloon incident. In the US, the Republican opposition is demanding a tougher stance on China. In China itself, the economic situation and the devastating wave of new COVID-19 cases are forcing the Communist Party to resort to nationalism as a new way to legitimise its rule. This means that, given the recent developments, a verbal escalation in bilateral contacts and mutual accusations should be expected. Nevertheless, Beijing and Washington still want to avoid direct confrontation in the near term. Therefore, it can be assumed that when the media lose interest in the incident, the two countries will once again try to temporarily stabilise their mutual relations.