

US/CHINA: Balloon fiasco deflates emerging détente

- Despite earlier Chinese balloons that US officials declined to publicize, the Biden administration apparently calculated that, given its low altitude, this balloon would inevitably be discovered.
- We doubt that Chinese leaders intended to engage in a brazen provocation ahead of a planned US visit to Beijing; a technical malfunction is a more plausible explanation for the incident.
- The nascent US-China détente is now in critical condition, though not entirely dead, and any future détentes would be similarly vulnerable to derailment by domestic politics.

The undeniable entertainment value of the alleged Chinese spy balloon incident sits uncomfortably alongside its grim implications for US-China relations. Key questions remain unanswered, but the takeaway is clear: the US-China détente that was struggling to be born before the incident is in critical condition, at least, if not entirely dead. Despite high hopes entering 2023, this year may turn into another rocky one for US-China relations.

Too puffy to ignore

Unnamed senior US defense officials told media that Chinese spy balloons have previously entered US airspace, including at least three times during the Trump administration and one previous instance under Biden; that US authorities were aware of the latest balloon before it entered US territory; and that the balloon neither posed a security threat to Americans nor offered any intelligence value to China beyond what satellites provide. In addition, some [reporting suggests](#) that the US military deploys similar surveillance balloons.

Given these facts, a key question is why the Biden administration decided to publicize this balloon but not previous ones. We suspect that unlike with previous Chinese balloons, US officials believed this one would inevitably be discovered by the public even absent official confirmation. On 2 February, hours before the Pentagon disclosed the situation to US media, a local Montana newspaper published a photo of the then-unidentified balloon. It was therefore a matter of time before the broader public would have started asking questions.

Provocation or malfunction?

The second key question is about Beijing's intentions. The foreign ministry's official statement on 3 February called the balloon a "civilian airship used for research, mainly meteorological." It added that the aircraft had "deviated far from its planned course" due to "limited self-steering capabilities" and that "the Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace."

We doubt that the aircraft was a weather balloon, but the claim that Chinese authorities lost control of the craft — causing it to sink to an altitude where it was visible to civilians on the ground and threatened to disrupt civilian air travel — appears more plausible. Bloomberg reported, citing unnamed senior US officials, that "China itself appeared to be caught off-guard by the bizarre incident." China's foreign ministry responded quickly when the State Department demanded that China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, answer a call from US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to discuss the incident.

Beyond the specifics, it is unlikely that Beijing intended to engage in a brazen provocation just days before Blinken's planned trip to Beijing. Recent signals all suggested that Beijing hoped the visit would build on progress from November's [Biden-Xi meeting](#). Blinken's visit would have been the first by a Biden cabinet official, and Blinken was reportedly scheduled to meet Xi himself. Since the Party Congress in October, Xi has appeared to engineer a [modest shift](#) towards a more conciliatory foreign posture.

US political firestorm

While harsh attacks on Biden from Republicans was predictable, some Democrats have joined them. US Senator Cory Booker said: "We should not have had this kind of incursion," adding that "we obviously had issues here." The Biden administration's decision to cancel Blinken's visit evidently reflected a judgment that proceeding with the trip would expose Biden to even more damaging "soft on China"-style attacks.

Fallout for bilateral relations

We never believed that the period of stabilization that began with the presidential meeting in Bali would lead to any structural changes in bilateral relations, but the balloon incident has nevertheless dimmed prospects even for an incremental rapprochement.

The Biden administration will brief the so-called "Gang of Eight," composed of top congressional leaders from both parties, on 7 February, which may provide Republicans with fodder for broader action designed to highlight Biden's supposed failures. The Republican-led House of Representatives was [already planning](#) to emphasize tough-on-China themes, and the newly formed House Select Committee on China may now hold hearings or launch investigations into Balloongate. Even absent balloon-specific policy changes, the incident has fueled the general atmosphere of anti-China sentiment.

Domestic politics is also shaping the Chinese government's reaction. The foreign ministry's initial statement of "regret" gave way to recrimination after the US military shot down the balloon. The ministry said the downing was "an excessive reaction that seriously violates international convention," adding that China "retains the right to respond further." A political imperative to condemn a perceived affront to national dignity probably motivated this response, but we doubt that China will retaliate substantively.

Soon forgotten?

A more optimistic course for US-China relations remains at least conceivable in the short term. The US State Department noted that "after consultations with our interagency partners, as well as with Congress, we have concluded that the conditions are not right at this moment" for Blinken's visit. But the statement added that Blinken "would plan to travel to the PRC at the earliest opportunity when conditions allow."

This statement hints at the possibility that the Biden administration is willing to let this incident pass by quickly. Insofar as the administration does not consider the balloon itself to be a significant provocation but was instead responding mainly to US domestic political pressures, the administration would likely be willing to re-schedule the Blinken trip once the US political firestorm dies down. Some chatter suggests that Blinken might meet Wang at the Munich Security Conference on 17-19 February, especially if the Chinese side initiates the invitation.

However, that storm looks set to continue raging for some time, and this incident illustrates just how constrained the Biden administration feels by anti-China pressure from Congress and the media. Even if the pre-balloon trajectory of bilateral relations could be restored, any future détente will be similarly vulnerable to derailment by an unplanned incident.

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