

US issues ludicrous “spy balloon” charge against China

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The past several days have seen feverish accusations by US authorities and media outlets of an alleged Chinese spy balloon “hovering” over ballistic missile launch sites in Montana.

From China’s response and expert accounts, however, it appears that a clumsy, hard-to-manoeuvre, high-altitude weather test balloon was blown by winds across North America. On its current course, the balloon was expected to drift off the US east coast on Saturday.

The claim that China would use such outmoded and difficult-to-control means to conduct surveillance over sensitive nuclear war sites, rather than sophisticated low-orbit satellites, is patently ridiculous. But the hysteria points to the increasingly strident war propaganda emanating from Washington against China, as well as the potential for such an incident to be inflated to trigger a military conflict.

The Pentagon said it had readied fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot down the craft if ordered to do so by President Joe Biden. On Friday, the White House abruptly used the incident to postpone a major two-day visit to Beijing by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Prominent figures in the US ruling establishment, including 2024 Republican presidential candidates ex-president Donald Trump and former South Carolina governor and UN ambassador Nikki Haley, demanded that the US military immediately shoot down the balloon.

Biden apparently took Pentagon advice not to blow up the errant balloon, citing the danger of falling debris from the craft, which was said to be the size of three buses. Yet the administration took the confrontational step of calling off Blinken’s trip, just before he was due to embark. The top-level visit had been agreed between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit last November in Indonesia. Blinken was due to meet Xi to discuss the worsening US-China relations.

In what appeared to be a conciliatory statement, the

Chinese foreign ministry said on Friday that the balloon was a civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research. It said the airship had limited “self-steering” capabilities and “deviated far from its planned course” because of winds. “The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace due to force majeure,” it said, citing a legal term used to refer to events beyond control.

Nevertheless, the Pentagon effectively dismissed the statement. “We are aware of the PRC [Peoples Republic of China] statement,” Pentagon press secretary Brigadier General Patrick Ryder said. “However, the fact is, we know that it’s a surveillance balloon. And I’m not going to be able to be more specific than that. We do know that the balloon has violated US airspace and international law, which is unacceptable.”

Seeming to contradict the hype about surveillance over missile silos, Ryder said the balloon was currently over the centre of the continental US and did not “present a military or physical threat to people on the ground.” A Pentagon official confirmed that the US had assessed that the balloon had only “limited” value in terms of providing intelligence China could not obtain by other technologies, such as spy satellites.

Despite playing down the threat, Ryder left open the option of military action. He said the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) was closely monitoring the balloon, which was roughly 60,000 feet above ground level, while the Biden administration weighed its options.

All the circumstances surrounding the balloon affair are dubious. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden had been briefed about the balloon on Tuesday. But nothing was said publicly until Thursday evening, when the Pentagon announced it was tracking “an intelligence-gathering balloon, most certainly launched by the People’s Republic of China.”

The Pentagon said one of the places the balloon was spotted was over the northwestern state of Montana, which is home to one of America's three nuclear missile fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base. That base reportedly has 150 intercontinental ballistic missile silos.

US media quoted anonymous Pentagon officials as saying that the balloon had travelled from China to the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, and through northwest Canada for a few days before arriving somewhere over Montana, where it was supposedly hovering on Wednesday.

Just after World War II, the US military started exploring the use of high-altitude spy balloons, which led to a large-scale series of missions called Project Genetrix. But this technology has been superseded by satellites, which can be accurately steered and equipped with advanced photographic and telecommunications-interception technology.

Singapore-based security analyst Alexander Neill, an adjunct fellow at Hawaii's Pacific Forum think tank, told Reuters: "China has its own constellation of spy and military satellites that are far more important and effective in terms of watching the US."

An editorial in the *China Daily*, a state media outlet, was scathing. "There is no way to know who fabricated the lie, but we can be sure about the ignorance of the fabricator," it commented. "Surveillance balloons being used as military technology dates back to the early 20th century, the technology is outdated, one can hardly imagine any nation like China still resorting to it today; at the same time, the shortest route between Beijing and Montana is over 9,000km, which makes it impossible to precisely control the flight of this or any balloon."

The extraordinary outburst of anti-China propaganda is entirely hypocritical to say the least. The US military undoubtedly uses its network of satellites to spy on Chinese military bases and activities. These are supplemented by ongoing intelligence gathering by US aircraft and spy ships operating close to the Chinese mainland. Moreover, the Pentagon has orchestrated one military provocation after another in the South China Sea by sending warplanes and warships through airspace and waters claimed by China, in the name of "freedom of navigation."

Whatever the exact political and geostrategic calculations by the White House in delaying or scrapping Blinken's visit, the decision came amid a mounting series of aggressive and provocative moves by the US against China.

These steps have included trips by Defense Secretary

Lloyd Austin, an ex-general, to South Korea and the Philippines this past week to strength military alliances directed against China, including gaining access to five further military bases in the Philippines.

At the same time, the US has ramped up efforts to sabotage China on hi-tech industries, including by ceasing approval licenses for American firms to export most items to Chinese technology giant Huawei and coercing the Netherlands and Japan to agree to join the US in limiting exports of advanced chipmaking equipment to China.

US House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy is also reportedly planning to visit Taiwan, recognised internationally as part of China, a trip that is calculated to lead to a flare-up of tensions as did a similar trip last August by his Democratic Party predecessor Nancy Pelosi.

As reports about the balloon were splashed in the media, CIA Director William Burns was speaking at an event at Washington's Georgetown University, at which he called China the "biggest geopolitical challenge" currently facing the United States. That declaration reiterated the Biden administration's public naming of China as an existential threat to US global power. Burns also claimed that the US knew "as a matter of intelligence" that Xi had ordered his military to be ready to conduct an "invasion" of the island of Taiwan by 2027.

Burns' assertion followed this week's leaking to the media of a blunt internal memo by Air Force General Michael Minihan predicting that the US would be at war with China over Taiwan by 2025 and ordering his commanders to implement detailed preparations.

Thus, far from China seeking to intimidate or trigger a conflict with the US via a "spy balloon," as shouted by the US and allied ruling elites and media, it is Washington that is escalating its confrontation with China.



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