

# New US diplomatic provocations fuel tensions with China

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In the wake of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing last week, the Biden administration, far from seeking to tone down its anti-China rhetoric and stabilise relations between the two countries, has upped the ante with new diplomatic provocations.

Speaking to wealthy donors as part of this 2024 re-election campaign last Tuesday, Biden bluntly defended his decision to shoot down a Chinese balloon that drifted over US airspace in February, and branded Chinese President Xi Jinping as "a dictator" who was embarrassed by the incident. Without offering a shred of evidence, he declared that the "balloon" was loaded with "spy equipment." Adding fuel to the fire, the US president told his audience not to worry about China because it "has real economic difficulties."

Biden's comments came just hours after Blinken told MSNBC that the two countries should call put an end to the controversy over the balloon incident, saying it was a chapter that "should be closed." Nominally at least, Blinken's trip to China was aimed at easing the sharp tensions caused by Washington's escalating confrontation with Beijing.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning declared that Biden's remarks "go totally against facts and seriously violate diplomatic protocol, and severely infringe on China's political dignity." The White House, however, made clear that Biden had no intention of retracting his comments.

Moreover, just days before, as he was leaving Beijing, Blinken stirred up further spying allegations against China. Asked during an interview with CBS whether he had raised allegations of Chinese intelligence gathering facilities in Cuba, he declared: "I did. I'm not going to characterise their response, but I told them that this is a serious concern for us."

Blinken said the US had taken steps in recent years to push back against Chinese spying in Latin America. "This is nothing new, but it is something of real concern. I was very clear about our concerns with China. But regardless of that, we've been going around to various places where we see this kind of activity, trying to put a stop to it," he said.

The previous week, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) claimed that China had initiated a "brash new geopolitical challenge" to the US by reaching a secret agreement with the Cuban government to build a new electronic surveillance base on the island. It would "allow Chinese intelligence services to scoop up electronic communications throughout southeastern US, where many military bases are located, and monitor US ship traffic."

The WSJ article, entitled "Cuba to host secret Chinese spy base focusing on US," has all the hallmarks of a provocative beat-up.

Furthermore, a White House official effectively dismissed the report, saying: "This is an ongoing issue, and not a new development." At the same time, however, the official continued to feed the story, declaring: "[China] conducted an upgrade of its intelligence collection facilities in Cuba in 2019. This is well-documented in the intelligence record."

None of this "well-documented record" has been made public, however. Both China and Cuba have declared the allegations to be false.

Whether or not China has or is building a spy base on Cuba, it is hardly news. Most countries engage in spying in one form or another. In 2013, former US National Security Agency analyst Edward Snowden revealed that the NSA spied on a massive scale, not only on US rivals but also on allied governments and on American citizens. NSA servers stored huge

amounts of electronic data derived from a range of surveillance programs that was then data-mined to yield intelligence on targeted individuals.

Indeed, as the *Wall Street Journal* indicated, the US spies on Cuba on a routine basis. As well as maintaining its notorious prison at its military base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, “the US has used the base as a signals intelligence station in the past.” In other words, US intelligence agencies used the base to “scoop up electronic communications,” to use the WSJ’s words, throughout Cuba and presumably of foreign embassies based in Havana, such as that of China.

The US has also escalated its provocative naval and air force operations in the South and East China Seas close to the Chinese mainland, including through the narrow Taiwan Strait, under the phony pretext of “freedom of navigation.” Many of these flights and naval movements are undoubtedly to collect intelligence on sensitive Chinese military bases, including its nuclear submarine bases on Hainan Island.

The “revelations” of Chinese spying from Cuba add to the litany of unsubstantiated claims and outright lies that form the basis of Washington’s relentless stream of anti-China propaganda. Moreover, the focus on Cuba and its close proximity to Florida carries the menacing implication that the US should take action to demand the dismantling of spy facilities on the island, bringing to mind the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The *Wall Street Journal* cited a bipartisan statement issued by top members of the Senate Intelligence Committee which declared that a Chinese intelligence facility in Cuba would pose a “serious threat to our national security and sovereignty” and urged the Biden administration to take action.

As Blinken made clear in his comments to CBS, the Biden administration is not just seeking to push back against China in Cuba but throughout Latin America. While nominally about spying, it is part of Washington’s far broader efforts to undermine China internationally, including economically, as it accelerates its military build-up against Beijing in preparation for war.

Speaking to NPR, Margaret Myers, a program director at the Washington think tank, the Inter-

American Dialogue, pointed to the underlying preoccupation in US foreign policy circles. “Certainly, we need to keep an eye on things that are happening in the intelligence-gathering space or the security space, but the question is largely an economic one,” she said, adding that economic engagement was critical for the region with implications for “US national security and US involvement in and influence in the region.”

Blinken’s trip to China was purportedly to ease tensions between the two countries. Taken together, however, Biden’s deliberately offensive comments about Xi and the White House allegations of Chinese spying from Cuba make clear that the US has no intention of stabilising relations. Whatever the immediate tactical considerations, the US preparations for conflict with China continue apace.



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