

Pentagon admits Chinese “spy balloon” did not spy on the US

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Months after the media frenzy over the so-called Chinese “spy” balloon passing over the US, the Pentagon acknowledged last week that the balloon neither collected nor transmitted data or intelligence. In other words, far from collecting and sending vital information about sensitive US military bases back to China as was alleged, the balloon did not spy at all.

The admission was not the subject of a formal announcement, let alone an apology to the Chinese government for shooting down the balloon on February 4. It was made in passing by Pentagon spokesman Brigadier General Pat Ryder in response to a question at a press conference.

While still alleging that the balloon had “intelligence collection capabilities,” Ryder unambiguously declared: “It has been our assessment now that it did not collect while it was transiting the United States or over-flying the United States.” At the same time, he claimed that unspecified US efforts contributed “to mitigate the potential collection efforts of that balloon.”

Beijing has always insisted that the balloon was a civilian research airship that had been accidentally blown off course. The Chinese government even issued an official apologetic statement of “regret” over the incident, which did nothing to stop the US propaganda machine from churning out an avalanche of articles and comments alleging “Chinese spying.”

The incident led to a further rupture of relations with China. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confronted top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference later in February, declaring the Chinese balloon an “unacceptable violation of US sovereignty and international law,” implying its entry into US airspace was deliberate. Blinken’s planned trip to China to mend relations was called off.

Just last month President Biden added further fuel to the fire. Speaking to wealthy contributors at a fundraising event, he claimed that Chinese President Xi Jinping got “very upset, in terms of when I shot that balloon down with two box cars full of spy equipment in it... [because] he didn’t know it was there.” The president added insult to injury, declaring: “That’s a great embarrassment for dictators. When they didn’t know what happened.”

Biden’s comments make clear that Chinese authorities did not even know where the balloon was and could not have been deliberately directing it to “spy” on US military facilities. As for the “two box cars of spy equipment,” Washington is yet to publicly produce a shred of evidence proving the balloon was anything other than what Beijing claims it was.

Brigadier General Ryder’s comments followed a question about an article that had appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Chinese balloon used American tech to spy on Americans.” Citing unnamed US officials, the article claimed that the preliminary findings of US investigators, after sifting through the debris recovered from the balloon, was that “the craft collected photos and videos but didn’t appear to transmit them.”

The article breathlessly declared the report “found the balloon was crammed with commercially available U.S. gear, some of it for sale online, and interspersed with more specialized Chinese sensors and other equipment to collect photos, video and other information to transmit to China,” which supported “a conclusion that the craft was intended for spying.”

Ryder not only denied the balloon had collected photos, videos and other information—over the US at least—but threw cold water on the notion that sensitive American technology had been used by China. While

refusing to go into specifics, he declared that “in previous cases, like drones and other capabilities... off-the-shelf, commercial U.S. components have been used... So that, in and of itself, is not surprising.”

The WSJ article has all the hallmarks of a media beat-up. The FBI, which was responsible for initiating the investigation, the US Defense Intelligence Agency and other intelligence agencies have been poring over the debris for months. The preliminary findings, however, while not public, are not new. Rather, as WSJ acknowledged, they “have been circulated within intelligence and defense agencies beginning in the second half of March, the officials said.”

The purpose of the article appears to be to give grist to the mill a push by sections of the defence and intelligence establishment to release the findings and put carefully selected parts of the debris on display to further ratchet up the anti-Chinese campaign.

In a letter to Biden last month, two Republican senators, Roger Wicker and Marco Rubio, wrote: “Your administration has yet to provide the American people a full accounting of how this spy platform was allowed to traverse across sovereign US territory, what the balloon carried, and what it collected during its mission.”

Ahead of Blinken’s rescheduled trip to Beijing last month, the White House played down the incident, saying both countries were putting it behind them. Biden declared at the time: “I don’t think the [Chinese] leadership knew where it was and knew what was in it and knew what was going on.”

Blinken’s visit was aimed at easing tensions with Beijing, temporarily at least, as the US-NATO war against Russia escalates and the Ukrainian counter-offensive stalls. Nothing of substance was decided during Blinken’s visit. Washington’s anti-Chinese propaganda, as well as its tariffs and economic bans and military build-up against China, continue apace. Indeed, Biden branded the Chinese president “a dictator” the day after Blinken met Xi.

Asked about the *Wall Street Journal* article, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning last Friday said: “I’m not aware of the sources of the report. As China has stated on many occasions, the unmanned Chinese civilian airship drifting over the US was an entirely unexpected accident caused by force majeure. The US calling it a ‘spy balloon’ is nothing but smear

against China.”

The entire scenario that China was using a balloon, which was at the mercy of the winds, to spy on US military bases was implausible from the outset. The Pentagon has now admitted that no data was collected over the US. No evidence has been produced to demonstrate it had “box cars full of spy equipment.” One can predict in advance that any findings or debris that might be publicly displayed in the future will be carefully selected and manipulated to feed Washington’s anti-China campaign as it prepares for war against Beijing.



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