

The "Chinese Spy Balloon" Incident: Why the Future of the Sino- American Relationship is still up in the air?

Louis Hobbs Martin

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About the author:

Louis is a recent MA International Security graduate from Sciences Po Paris currently preparing the French Civil Service Examinations. After having lived in Hong Kong for five years prior to studying at university, he gradually developed a strong interest in East Asian affairs.

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After a year which saw tensions between China and the United States reach new heights particularly in respect of Taiwan, Russia, semiconductors, and increasing US involvement in the Indo-Pacific, the meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping on the side-lines of the G20 Summit in Bali in November 2022 seemed to offer a glimmer of hope that Sino-American relations would improve in 2023. These hopes have allegedly already blown up (both literally and figuratively) with the so-called "Chinese Spy Balloon" incident. The balloon, which is believed to belong to China, first entered the US air defence zone around the Aleutian Islands, West of Alaska, on 28th January, before flying over Canada, re-entering US territory over Montana, then crossing the United States up until the coast of South Carolina where it was shot down by a US Air Force F-22 fighter jet on 4th February. Although full details surrounding this incident are yet to be released, it nonetheless already raises numerous questions.

Given China's technological might and the current context in Sino-American relations, the timing and use by China of "spy balloons" is, perhaps, surprising.

China is estimated to have over 500 satellites, making it the 2nd largest satellite fleet in the world behind the United States. Why then resort to using a seemingly obsolete and more visible device to spy on other States? Although they have progressively been replaced by devices such as satellites and drones, balloons still maintain certain advantages compared to their more modern counterparts when equipped with equipment such as cameras, radars and radio devices. Compared to regular aircrafts, balloons can stay up in the air for longer, advance at a slower speed and are harder to detect, enabling them to cover areas in greater detail. As such, many States still use balloons for surveillance, including the United States with its Raven Aerostar balloons. China has reportedly already flown 4 balloons in US airspace prior to this incident since 2016 (3 times under Trump, once under Biden). In the case of the "Chinese Spy balloon", the balloon has allegedly been manoeuvred to fly over sensitive American military sites, including a nuclear missile site in Montana.

Yet, for all the advantages of using balloons to spy over other States, it remains unclear as to why China would choose this specific moment to send one over the United States. After a challenging period, which saw protesters express discontent towards the country's leadership and its strict "Zero-Covid" policy, and with its economy growing by "only" 3% last year, the

lowest level since 1976, the aim of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2023 would logically be to calm its domestic critics and get its economy back on track. To do so would require dialling down its “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, including improving relations with the US through renewed dialogue, as illustrated by the Xi-Biden meeting in November 2022. In this context, it seems hard to believe that the benefits of obtaining intelligence of sensitive American military sites far outweigh the further diplomatic fallout with the US created by this incident, especially considering that satellites could have also obtained such information, albeit with lesser precision but at least without being detected. It seems obvious that the deliberate sending of a spy balloon over military sites (if indeed it was deliberate) would be likely to re-inflate the Sino-American tensions and to be contrary to the focus on domestic policies of President Xi. As such, it begs the question as to whether sending the balloon to spy over the US was approved by Xi himself. If so, this could either be a mere miscalculation by China or a way to send a message to the United States, and if not, this could signal a disagreement within the Chinese leadership as to the posture to adopt vis-à-vis the United States, with some presumably continuing to favour a harder stance rather than renewing dialogue. Unfortunately, given the relatively small amount of detail released so far regarding this incident, China’s intentions remain unclear at this point in time.

Regardless of why China sent the spy balloon to the US, this incident had immediate consequences.

In the wake of this incident, The US immediately denounced China’s actions, and alleged that this incident is not unique, accusing China of having a global fleet of balloons, an accusation denied by Beijing. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who was supposed to visit China, becoming the first Biden Cabinet Secretary to visit the country and the first Secretary of State to do so since 2017, decided to postpone his visit. Blinken was expected to meet President Xi, Qin Gang, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Wang Yi, China’s highest ranked diplomat. The US have also since included 6 Chinese companies linked to the balloon incident on its Entity List (which already includes notable Chinese firms such as Huawei). The incident has garnered strong domestic reaction in the US, allowing both parties to show their anti-China position with ever stronger rhetoric. Since 4th February, the US have shot an additional three devices in US/Canadian air space, although no State has claimed these and there is for the time being no evidence that these were used for spying purposes.

On the other hand, China has repeatedly declared that the balloon was a civilian weather airship used to collect meteorological data which was blown off course by high winds. Beijing has called the shooting down of the device a serious violation of international conventions and confirmed it had rejected a subsequent offer by the US to organise talks between Minister of National

Defence Wei Fenghe and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to clarify the situation, on the basis that the current atmosphere is not suitable for dialogue. China has also claimed that the US are waging information and public opinion warfare and have flown 10 balloons over China since the beginning of last year, claims denied by the White House.

The Blinken-Wang Yi meeting which took place on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on 18th February, the highest-level meeting between officials of both States following the incident, could have been the perfect opportunity to de-escalate tensions and renew dialogue. Instead, Blinken recalled how this incident represented an unacceptable violation of US sovereignty “which must never again occur”, and warned China against supplying weapons to Russia and further helping it evade sanctions. Meanwhile, Wang Yi, rather than apologising for the spy balloon, described the US response to the incident as “absurd and hysterical”. Needless to say, these are generally not statements made by States seeking de-escalation and reconciliation. Rather, this could suggest that the hope of seeing improved Sino-American dialogue in 2023 may be short-lived. This is especially worrisome when considering that the initial points of tension between the US and China, namely Taiwan, Russia, semiconductors and increasing US involvement in the Indo-Pacific, not only remain unsolved, but may yet worsen in months to come, as illustrated by the potential visits this Spring of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to Taiwan and of Xi to Moscow. Of course, given how recent the “Chinese Spy Balloon” incident is, any conclusion regarding its consequences must be drawn with caution, but immediate reactions in the wake of the incident suggest that the future of the Sino-American relationship is, unlike the spy balloon, still up in the air.