**The balloon saga: Is Washington overreacting?**

[**Dr Imran Khalid**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-imran-khalid)

February 15, 2023

Amidst all the potential disruptors to the first visit by an American secretary of state to China since 2018, a Chinese balloon over Montana was certainly an unexpected one. On February 2nd, the Pentagon announced that it was monitoring the high-altitude Chinese balloon, which was reportedly being used for intelligence purposes. The following day, US officials disclosed that Antony Blinken’s scheduled trip to Beijing, which was set to commence on February 5th, was being postponed.

It was hoped that the visit would serve to coagulate a recent easing of tensions, which had been achieved after a meeting between President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping in Bali last November, and address a range of delicate topics, including Taiwan and China’s support of Russia in the Ukrainian conflict. This balloon episode serves as a reminder of the complex geopolitical landscape in which these two global powers operate. At stake are not just bilateral relations, but also the larger strategic balance of power in the region and beyond. Ironically, ever since the so-called “spy balloon” started making headlines in the American and global media in the first week of this month, many such balloons belonging to different countries are being reportedly spotted across the globe. Apparently, all these high-altitude inflatables are engaged in weather and geographical research work, but all these balloons have suddenly become the subject of intense scrutiny after a kind of hysterical noise in the American media. In a bizarre turn of events, US President Joe Biden made the decision to shoot down the controversial Chinese weather research balloon that had inadvertently strayed into American airspace, despite Beijing’s insistence that it was accidental and unintentional. There are ample reasons to believe that Washington has deliberately overblown the controversy without any tangible evidence of the balloon being involved in any “surveillance” job.

[Russian Defense Ministry claims 20 Ukrainian drones downed over past day](https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Feb-2023/russian-defense-ministry-claims-20-ukrainian-drones-downed-over-past-day)

There are many pricking questions surrounding the whole episode. As per the statements of the US officials and Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims, the director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the US Senate the Senate Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, the balloon was spotted on January 28 in Alaska and it was viewed as to be an innocuous flying object without any “hostile intentions”, therefore, it was allowed to float in the American airspace. However, they changed their perception of the balloon and labeled it as “spy balloon” after tracking its flight route near the sensitive nuclear installations. The forensic analysis of the wreckage of the Chinese balloon in the FBI laboratory in Virginia has not divulged any concrete evidence suggesting that the balloon was being used for espionage purposes. No unusual communication gadgets have been found by the US authorities from the debris of the flattened and shattered balloon. The hype is being created unnecessarily. The first question is what additional information these HABs can provide to the Chinese beyond what they have been garnering through their satellites. Secondly, if these balloons provide no or very little additional information, then why did the Chinese take the risk of using such a tool that could have been easily spotted and tracked? The reality is that if the Americans had found some concrete evidence from the wreckage of the destroyed balloon, then the Biden administration would have certainly resorted to lodging a formal diplomatic complaint against Beijing by now.

[Pakistan to welcome investment from UAE: Ishaq Dar](https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Feb-2023/pakistan-to-welcome-investment-from-uae-ishaq-dar)

Weather research balloons are the routine thing in the domain of geographic and metrological scientific studies. This week, Chinese officials informed the media that high-altitude balloons from the United States had flown over Chinese airspace more than 10 times since the beginning of last year without permission from Chinese authorities. But China has never raised any objection or complaint. “It is not an uncommon thing for US balloons to illegally enter other countries’ airspace,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said, highlighting that China has dealt with the US balloons in a responsible and professional way. Though the White House has refuted this statement, the whole balloon incident highlights the fraught relationship between the US and China and the potential for misunderstandings and overreactions in the era of high-tech surveillance. The Biden administration is certainly overreacting to this episode. In a scene straight out of a Hollywood blockbuster, the United States is painting a picture of defending itself from a UFO invasion. But the reality is a bit less exciting, as the US has been engaging in unprecedented air defense activity triggered by the downing of a Chinese meteorological research balloon off the coast of South Carolina.

[Pakistan's total liquid foreign reserves reach $8.70 billion](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2023/pakistan-s-total-liquid-foreign-reserves-reach-dollar-8-70-billion)

Despite China’s protestations that the balloon was blown off course by strong winds and posed no threat, the US has continued to sensationalize the incident by describing it as a “spy balloon” and accusing China of deliberately surveilling sensitive US military sites. The result has been a parade of collective irrationality, with US lawmakers overwhelmingly passing a resolution condemning China for its alleged “espionage”. This undue focus on a “relatively insignificant” national security issue is disproportionate and misguided. Instead, the US should focus on more sophisticated surveillance methods, and stop hyping up a non-existent issue. Perhaps, the domestic political pressure is compelling the Biden administration to create “an issue” to outcompete the Republicans’ anti-China thrust. The cancellation of Blinken’s trip has poured cold water over all the recent efforts by Beijing to normalize the bilateral ties with Washington.

[FIFA Women’s World Cup Trophy Tour to embark on a game-changing global journey this month](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2023/fifa-women-s-world-cup-trophy-tour-to-embark-on-a-game-changing-global-journey-this-month)

So far, Beijing has been handling this issue very calmly. There have been continuous efforts by China to clarify and address the Americans’ apprehensions about the balloon, but it seems, the hawkish elements within the Biden administration are trying to utilize this episode to hyperinflate the tensions between the two countries – apparently to gain some political points in domestic politics. As the hot air balloon debate rages on, the United States has made a decisive move to tighten the flow of sensitive technologies to Chinese companies. With the US Bureau of Industry and Security blacklisting six Chinese entities for their alleged support of China’s military modernization, particularly in the realm of aerospace programs involving airships and balloons, it’s clear that the Biden administration is succumbing to domestic political pressures to follow in the footsteps of former President Donald Trump, who kept the flames of acrimony burning throughout his tenure. These issues cannot be tackled in isolation, and progress will depend on maintaining constructive and substantive dialogue between the two countries.

[PTI worker sentenced to 3 years in prison for maligning army](https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2023/pti-worker-sentenced-to-3-years-in-prison-for-maligning-army)

Washington will need to demonstrate that it is committed to addressing the concerns of its American counterparts in a manner that is constructive and productive. Whether or not the balloon incident was intentional or accidental, it highlights the need for greater transparency and communication to avoid unintended misunderstandings or conflicts. The path forward will require a delicate balance of engagement and deterrence, cooperation, and competition. Both sides will need to find ways to manage their differences and build on areas of common interest. The stakes are high, and the challenges are numerous.