

The China Balloon Incident: The Drama within the Drama

Mel Gurtov

Abstract: *The recent China Balloon Incident has all the appearance of high drama, though the heat is mainly provided by domestic politics rather than a strategic face-off of the U-2 or Cuba Missile Crisis variety. This is a drama in three acts. In Act 1, "Discovery", the Biden administration went into action mode on finding that a Chinese "spy" balloon had crossed the US. An air force jet shot the balloon down, displaying Cold War-style toughness with China. In Act 2, "Evaluation", new facts emerged that shed further light on the episode. Act 3, "Blaming", involves mutual recriminations that obscure the real issue: escalating great power tensions between the United States and China.*

Keywords: *China Spy Balloon, US-China Conflict, Espionage*



Figure 1: A Chinese surveillance balloon floats over Billings, Montana on Wednesday, 1 February 2023. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The China Balloon Incident has all the appearance of high drama, though the heat is mainly provided by domestic politics rather than a strategic face-off of the U-2 or Cuba Missile Crisis variety. There are three acts in this drama. In Act 1, "Discovery", the Biden administration went into action mode upon finding that a Chinese "spy" balloon had crossed over half the United States. An air force jet shot the balloon down, displaying Cold War-style toughness with China. In Act 2, "Evaluation", new facts emerged that shed further light on the episode. Act 3, "Blaming", involves mutual recriminations that obscure the

real issue: escalating tensions between the United States and China and an absence of serious diplomatic engagement.

Act 2 is important for undermining initial US assumptions about Chinese motives, overstating the balloon's capabilities, and showing the Biden administration's actual concerns. In brief:

- US intelligence was aware of the balloon from the moment it entered US airspace. Intelligence officials did not consider the balloon particularly threatening. Such intrusions had occurred at least four times in the recent past—including three on Trump's watch—all without incident. In fact, senior Trump officials, by their own admission, were completely unaware of those incidents (Samuels 2023). But Biden's people were—and determined right away that the balloon was of "limited" spying capability. "It's not a major breach" of security, Biden acknowledged in an interview (Olorunnipa 2023).
- Biden's hesitancy to shoot down the balloon had as much to do with rabid Republican charges of weakness as with concern about a violation of US sovereignty or about causing debris to fall over populated areas.
- Beijing accepted responsibility for violating US territory, but the larger question of authorization for balloon missions remains. Chinese balloon launches may not be authorized at the highest levels—that is, by Xi Jinping—but may be under lower-level authority, most likely military. Students of bureaucracy will recognize this possibility immediately: a government agency that acts autonomously, without consistent top-level oversight. It is business as usual, separate from (in this case) the

foreign ministry. Xi surely was aware of balloon activity in general, but not its daily schedule. (Think of President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, demanding to know why US missiles were still based in Turkey despite his order for their removal.) After all, US officials say Chinese balloons have been spotted in 40 countries on five continents in recent years. That suggests a busy balloon unit that routinely acts on its own—which might even mean sabotaging a diplomatic event that a unit's leader happens to oppose.

- Thus far the Biden administration has not said the balloon captured important US security data. It might have been a weather balloon and might have been spying on US military installations. A high-altitude balloon is capable of doing both, though its capabilities would seem to be far lower than those of Chinese satellites and other intelligence-gathering devices.

What Should Have Happened

The Chinese balloon was not a significant security threat, the incident should not have been treated as though it was one, and the entire matter should instead have been put on Secretary of State Antony Blinken's agenda when he visited Beijing as scheduled. That is what diplomacy is all about: heading off crises. During and since the Cold War, the United States and China have had plenty of incidents of far greater magnitude that were settled diplomatically, such as the mistaken US bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the US shooting down of a Chinese jet over Hainan in 2001. Both those incidents involved loss of life. China's chief foreign policy official, Wang Yi, called Blinken to urge a calm, "professional" approach to their upcoming

meeting in light of the balloon incident. But the Americans chose the opposite course, postponing Blinken's trip and feeding the anti-China sentiment that has swept Congress.

Clear, immediate communication in a crisis is essential. As Robert Zoellick (2023) writes in the *Washington Post*, Blinken should have used the balloon incident to press for broader and deeper US-China communication, both to head off potential trouble and to prevent escalation of a confrontation. "Blinken," Zoellick writes, "should explain [to the Chinese] why intrusions such as the balloon—accidental or not—demonstrate the need for built-in precautions. Washington should propose a transparency agenda to share information without over-reliance on spying." He is calling for an early warning system, not just on military movements and nuclear weapons but also on pandemics, climate changes, and other issues where greater transparency would enhance mutual (and global) security.

Zoellick's point is especially important in light of US concerns about the quality of Beijing's crisis decision making (Pierson 2023). Questions are being raised about Xi Jinping's leadership, the national security establishment's competence, and the reliability of the Chinese intelligence apparatus. But don't the Chinese have reason to doubt the same about US decision making? Hyping the China threat and turning an incident into a national security crisis is surely turning heads in Beijing. Greater transparency such as Zoellick is urging is only part of the problem; the other part is mutual confidence in each government's crisis management system.

The Blame Game and the Real Crisis

Act 3 of the incident is "Blaming". The Chinese, not to be outdone by American outrage, charge that US balloon intrusions over China are a "common occurrence", more than ten times last

year (Wakabayashi and Fu 2023). (The Biden administration denied the charge but referred only to "surveillance" balloons, so China's claim might be accurate.) China is also using the incident to arouse nationalist feelings—a predictable response to accusations. In an effort to move from defense to offense, Beijing media are stressing the American overreaction, the misguided emphasis on the "China threat", and the effort to "fan the flames" of conflict (Li 2023; Wang and Dong 2023).

Expect plenty of the same language on the US side, especially but not exclusively from far-right Republicans—as evidenced by a resolution passed unanimously in the House of Representatives on 9 February that condemns China's "brazen violation of United States sovereignty". Republicans have been introducing ideologically driven bills in Congress which, like that resolution, are directed at "the Chinese Communist Party" (CCP)—bills that would, for example, prevent mainland Chinese from acquiring land, recognize Taiwan as an independent state, limit petroleum product sales to China, prohibit federal support of schools that hire Chinese instructors "funded" by the CCP, and demand reimbursement from China for US COVID-19 aid.

The balloon incident thus cannot be evaluated separately from the precipitous decline in US-China relations—a decline measured by the Biden administration's East Asia security coalition building directed at the China threat and protection of Taiwan, the bipartisan consensus in Congress that is spearheading the "chips war" with China, and US public opinion that overwhelmingly views China unfavorably. These developments have put China on the defensive at precisely the moment when Xi Jinping's Party-State has been weakened by a lagging economy, post-Covid blues, and international criticism over its repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Thus does the spiral of conflict continue, with few voices of reason being heard to stop it. Liberals in Congress, whether out of genuine belief or fear of being called "panda huggers", seem quite inclined to go along with legislation targeting China on all fronts. Biden's top civilian and military officials adhere to the view that China is a greater strategic threat than Russia, and consistently raise alarms about a near-future Chinese attack on Taiwan despite no evidence of Chinese preparation for one. Allies in Asia and Europe are being pulled into a containment network that is both military—such as Japan's new national security strategy, which calls for increased military spending, additional US forces in Okinawa, and a counterattack capability; and US military access to four more bases in the Philippines—and economic, such as Japanese and Netherlands agreement to join in stopping semiconductor technology exports to China.

This China-targeted express train will be hard to derail. During the Mao era, the cold war with China only ended in the early 1970s when both Beijing and Washington separately concluded that Moscow was the greater enemy. Mao rejected having dual enemies, deciding that "US imperialism" was less of a threat than "Soviet social-imperialism". And the Nixon-Kissinger team saw how, by making an historic visit to China, a strategic entente could be used to US advantage. Now the Biden administration confronts dual nuclear-weapon adversaries, engaging in a proxy war with one (Russia) that has threatened to use nuclear weapons while confronting another (China) whose expanding military capabilities include plans for a major expansion of its long-range missile force. One would think the time is ripe for strategic rethinking in DC.

References

Li, Shirui 李诗睿. 2023. "美智库炒作 '中国间谍

冰箱' 后, 美军方又称发现疑似 '中国间谍气球' [After the U.S. Think Tank Hyped the 'Chinese Spy Refrigerator', the U.S. Military Also Discovered a Suspected 'Chinese Spy Balloon']. 环球网 [Global Times Net], 3 February. archive.is/UgfgB-selection-2085.0-2085.32.

Olorunnipa, Toluse. 2023. "The Latest: Biden Says Chinese Spy Balloon 'Not a Major Breach,' in Telemundo Interview." *The Washington Post*, 9 February. www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/09/biden-florida-social-security-medicare/ - link-X2J4OYGKGVHKKHIWC6R4PVKKWAY.

Pierson, David. 2023. "China Balloon Dispute Aims Attention at Xi's Leadership." *The New York Times*, 6 February. www.nytimes.com/2023/02/06/world/asia/china-balloon-xi-jinping.html.

Samuels, Brett. 2023. "Why Trump Officials Were Unaware of Chinese Spy Balloons." *The Hill*, 11 February. thehill.com/homenews/administration/3853310-why-trump-officials-were-unaware-of-chinese-spy-balloons.

Wakabayashi, Daisuke and Claire Fu 2023. "China Says U.S. Regularly Sends Balloons Into Its Airspace." *The New York Times*, 13 February. www.nytimes.com/2023/02/13/world/asia/china-us-balloons-airspace.html.

Wang, Vivian Wang and Joy Dong. 2023. "China Tries to Play Down Balloon Dispute with Censorship and Memes." *The New York Times*, 7 February. www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/world/asia/china-balloon-propaganda.html.

Zoellick, Robert B. 2023. "Engage, Don't Cancel, China over the Balloon." *The Washington Post*, 14 February. www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/14/china-balloon-diplomacy-blinken.

Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University and Senior Editor of *Asian Perspective*. His latest book, *Engaging China: Rebuilding Sino-American Relations*, will be published in October by Rowman & Littlefield. He blogs at *In the Human Interest: Critical Appraisals of Foreign Affairs and Politics from a Global-Citizen Perspective*.