

US shoots down Chinese surveillance balloon

George Gourlay reports on how the US' actions threaten further diplomatic tensions

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Floating over North America, a mysterious white balloon following the wind from the Pacific raised suspicions - and more than a few eyebrows - before it was shot down by the US military on the 4th of February.

Its country of origin, China, had remained secretive about the balloon's purpose as it carried out its tour, entering the US air defence zone north of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska on the 28th of January before travelling through Canada and re-entering the United States on the 31st of January over Idaho. The balloon was only brought to officials' attention after it was noticed flying over Montana by witnesses on the ground. From there, it journeyed under monitoring by the Pentagon in a South-East direction until it reached South Carolina, where it was apprehended by an F-22 fighter jet.

The decision to shoot the object down had been approved by President Biden three days prior, though the Pentagon abstained to let the balloon continue its journey until it was over water to avoid debris falling on populated areas.

The balloon was eventually shot down with one missile and fell to the sea near Myrtle Beach, SC following

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Source: Chase Doak (via Wikimedia Commons)

a small explosion. The military has been recovering debris spread over seven miles with two naval ships.

US officials were sceptical of Beijing's reasoning that the balloon had blown off course while conducting scientific research and weather data collection. Speculating that its flight path was covering sensitive military sites, including a missile base in Montana, they levelled allegations of spying at China. The state department has since identified (from images taken of the balloon by U2 spy planes) that the equipment "was clearly for intelligence-surveillance and inconsistent with the equipment onboard weather balloons."

Tensions between the two powers now appear heightened beyond

their usual exalted status. The matter prompted US foreign secretary, Antony Blinken, to postpone a scheduled trip to Beijing on the 5th of February where he would have met with President Xi Jinping. Blinken described the fiasco as "an irresponsible act." The Pentagon also made clear their dissatisfaction over the incident, which they say was an "unacceptable violation" of US sovereignty.

The episode has also caused issues for China's domestic agenda with Taiwan issuing a statement of condemnation. Self-ruled Taiwan, which China considers a breakaway province destined for indoctrination under Beijing, stated through its foreign ministry: "The Chinese Com-

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munist Party government's actions that violate international law and violate the airspace and sovereignty of other countries should not be tolerated in a civilised international community.”

Beijing confirmed that it had refused a phone discussion with US defence secretary Lloyd Austin which may have provided some consolidation on the matter, instead stating: "This irresponsible and seriously mistaken approach by the US did not create a proper atmosphere for dialogue and exchanges between the two militaries.”

The United States' military is now set to bolster its already expansive presence in Asia through a deal with the Philippines for four additional military bases in the South China Sea. The move will fill a gap in the US' 'arc' around China, which already includes military bases in South Korea, Japan, and Australia.

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