



# That's no moon . . . it's a balloon!

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In early February 2023, a white moon-shaped object was spotted floating around in American airspace. The US government quickly determined that the strange object was in fact a high-altitude surveillance balloon from China (US Department of Defense 2023). The spy balloon drew so much attention that Americans, including politicians and the media, became infuriated over the matter, which inspired anger, even fear, but also humour. The event produced a lot of jokes in the media, especially in the region where the balloon was spotted. The occasion also inspired a *Saturday Night Live* parody (Sevastopulo and Leahy 2023). Although the Pentagon stated that the balloon floating around did not pose any threat to US national security, the White House still decided to shoot it down on 4 February (Kiracofe 2023).

As the diplomatic challenges between the US and China continue, both parties maintain a strong stance with regard to the situation. While US intelligence services tracked the balloon and witnessed it being shot down, they also noted that it was believed to have kept flying over Hawaii and Guam (Qingqing 2023). In a statement, President Joe Biden first remarked that the use of the spy balloon was unacceptable and a violation of US sovereignty, before later stating that the object may have been a research balloon instead of a spy craft (Baker 2023). The US subsequently decided to try to smooth things over by planning to speak with President Xi Jinping to maintain open lines of communication (Baker 2023). However, China asserted that the balloon was nothing more than a simple civilian airship, a weather balloon in fact, that had entered US airspace accidentally due to bad weather conditions, and that the US was overreacting and being paranoid in shooting it down (Qingqing 2023). In principle, as per international law, an exception can be made for aircraft illegally entering the airspace of another country in cases of *force*

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*majeure* or emergency. Accordingly, the US condemnation of the presence of the surveillance object in its airspace was firmly rejected by China, with the country expressing its dissatisfaction with this accusation by suggesting that it was an ill-intentioned political manipulation of the facts (Qingqing 2023).

The mystery balloon incident came at a critical moment. Following the November 2022 agreement between the two leaders to further deepen bilateral relations, a visit to Beijing by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was planned—this would have been the first trip to China by a US Secretary of State for many years. However, due to the incident, the meeting was cancelled (Rutwich 2023). In late February, Blinken met with the Chinese Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, Wang Yi, at the annual Munich Security Conference. Relations between the two countries are currently at their lowest point for many years, and the meeting in Munich did not seem to improve the situation. Although the main focus of the Munich Conference was Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, Blinken and Wang's focus was rather more on the recent tensions created by the spy balloon. This is indicative of exactly how unstable relations between the US and China currently are (Ioanes 2023). This peak in tensions is not due to the surveillance device alone, but the situation is emblematic of the rising hostilities between the US and China over time. It follows, first, from the US's strong presence in the Pacific, which threatens China's power over the disputed areas of the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan, and second, from China's 'good' relationship with Russia. Naturally, the ongoing war in Ukraine further complicates the diplomatic relationship between the two countries (Ioanes 2023).

This balloon incident highlights China's desire to collect information on its main geopolitical rival amid the frayed diplomatic relations. Over the past 15 years the Chinese Intelligence Agency has become active abroad and the People's Liberation Army has expanded its surveillance capabilities. As the US has stepped up its counter-intelligence operations, China has adapted its espionage methods, and the balloon could simply be a manifestation of such efforts (Sevastopulo and Leahy 2023). However, as China sent objects flying over US airspace, the US military got a real-life chance to play Bloons TD—a computer defence game in which the player has to stop waves of balloons. Simply put, the US shooting down the balloon could indicate that they have managed to 'level up' and are ready to face the next Chinese 'Bloons' (Hussey 2023).

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