

Big China Spy Balloon Moving East Over US, Pentagon Says

The Pentagon said at midday Friday that a Chinese spy balloon had moved eastward and was over the central United States, and that the U.S. rejected China's claims that it was not being used for surveillance.

Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, refused to provide details on exactly where the balloon was or whether there was any new consideration of shooting it down. The military had ruled that option out, officials had said, due to potential risks to people on the ground.

Ryder said it was at an altitude of about 60,000 feet, was maneuverable and had changed course. He said it currently was posing no threat. He said there was only one balloon being tracked.

Earlier, the U.S. announced that Secretary of State Antony Blinken had postponed a planned high-stakes weekend diplomatic trip to China as the Biden administration weighed a broader response to the discovery of a high-altitude Chinese balloon flying over sensitive sites in the western United States.

That abrupt decision came despite China's claim that the balloon was a weather research "airship" that had blown off course. The U.S. has described it as a surveillance vehicle.

The development came just before Blinken had been due to depart Washington for Beijing and marked a new blow to already strained U.S.-Chinese relations.

President Joe Biden declined to comment when questioned at an economic event. Two 2024 reelection challengers, former

President Donald Trump, and Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador, said the U.S. should immediately shoot down the balloon.

Discovery of the balloon was announced by Pentagon officials who said one of the places it was spotted was over the state of Montana, which is home to one of America's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base.

A senior defense official said the U.S. prepared fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot down the balloon if ordered. The Pentagon ultimately recommended against it, noting that even as the balloon was over a sparsely populated area of Montana, its size would create a debris field large enough that it could have put people at risk.

The official said the balloon was headed over the Montana missile fields, but the U.S. has assessed that it had only "limited" value in terms of providing intelligence China couldn't obtain by other technologies, such as spy satellites.

The discovery alarmed many in Washington across the country and, besides the U.S. protests lodged with Chinese officials, it attracted strong criticism of the administration from Republican members of Congress who have advocated taking a tougher stance with China.

China, which angrily denounces surveillance attempts by the U.S. and others over areas it considers to be its territory and once forced down an American spy plane, offered a generally muted reaction to the Pentagon announcement.

In a relatively conciliatory statement, the Chinese foreign ministry said late Friday that the balloon was a civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research. The ministry said the airship has limited "self-steering" capabilities and "deviated far from its planned course" because of winds.

"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship

into U.S. airspace due to force majeure," the statement said, citing a legal term used to refer to events beyond one's control.

Blinken had been prepared as late as Thursday to travel to Beijing this weekend but the administration had begun to reconsider the trip following the discovery of the balloon on Wednesday, even before its presence was made public, an official said.

The official, who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter, said the administration had "noted" China's expression of regret.

Blinken's long-anticipated meetings with senior Chinese officials had been seen in both countries as a way to find some areas of common ground at a time of major disagreements over Taiwan, human rights, China's claims in the South China Sea, North Korea, Russia's war in Ukraine, trade policy and climate change.

Although the trip, which was agreed to in November by President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit in Indonesia, had not been formally announced, officials in both Beijing and Washington had been talking in recent days about Blinken's imminent arrival.

The meetings were to begin on Sunday and go through Monday.

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