China Says It’s Looking Into Report of Spy Balloon Over US

China said Friday it is looking into reports that a Chinese spy balloon has been flying in U.S. airspace and urged calm, adding that it has “no intention of violating the territory and airspace of any sovereign country.”

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning also said she had no information about whether a trip to China by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken planned for next week will proceed as scheduled.

At a daily briefing, Mao said that politicians and the public should withhold judgment “before we have a clear understanding of the facts” about the spy balloon reports.

Blinken would be the highest-ranking member of President Joe Biden’s administration to visit China, arriving amid efforts to mitigate a sharp downturn in relations between Beijing and Washington over trade, Taiwan, human rights and China’s claims in the South China Sea.

“China is a responsible country and has always strictly abided by international laws, and China has no intention of violating the territory and airspace of any sovereign country. As for the balloon, as I’ve mentioned just now, we are looking into and verifying the situation and hope that both sides can handle this together calmly and carefully,” Mao said.

“As for Blinken’s visit to China, I have no information,” she said.

A senior defense official told Pentagon reporters that the U.S. has “very high confidence” that the object was a Chinese

high-altitude balloon and was flying over sensitive sites to collect information.

One of the places the balloon 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. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information.

Pentagon press secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said the balloon is "currently traveling at an altitude well above commercial air traffic and does not present a military or physical threat to people on the ground."

Ryder said similar balloon activity has been seen in the past several years and the government has taken steps to ensure no sensitive information was stolen.

President Biden was briefed and asked the military to present options, according to a senior administration official, who was also not authorized to publicly discuss sensitive information.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised against taking "kinetic action" because of risks to the safety of people on the ground. Biden accepted that recommendation.

The defense official said the U.S. has "engaged" Chinese officials through multiple channels and communicated the seriousness of the matter.

Blinken's visit was expected to start this Sunday in an effort to try to find common ground on issues from trade policy to climate change. Although the trip has not been formally announced, both Beijing and Washington have been talking about his imminent arrival.

The 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.

It was not clear what will happen with the balloon if it isn't brought down.

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

The official would not specify the size of the balloon but said commercial pilots could spot it from their cockpits. All air traffic was halted at Montana's Billings Logan International Airport from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday, as the military provided options to the White House.

A photograph of a large white balloon lingering over the area was captured by The Billings Gazette. The balloon could be seen drifting in and out of clouds and had what appeared to be a solar array hanging from the bottom, said Gazette photographer Larry Mayer.

The balloon's appearance adds to national security concerns among lawmakers over China's influence in the U.S., ranging from the prevalence of the hugely popular smartphone app TikTok to purchases of American farmland.

"China's brazen disregard for U.S. sovereignty is a destabilizing action that must be addressed," Republican Party House Speaker Kevin McCarthy tweeted.

Tensions with China are particularly high on numerous issues, ranging from Taiwan and the South China Sea to human rights in China's western Xinjiang region and the clampdown on democracy

activists in Hong Kong. Not least on that list of irritants are China's tacit support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its refusal to rein in North Korea's expanding ballistic missile program and ongoing disputes over trade and technology.

On Tuesday, Taiwan scrambled fighter jets, put its navy on alert and activated missile systems in response to nearby operations by 34 Chinese military aircraft and nine warships that are part Beijing's strategy to unsettle and intimidate the self-governing island democracy.

Twenty of those aircraft crossed the central line in the Taiwan Strait that has long been an unofficial buffer zone between the two sides, which separated during a civil war in 1949.

Beijing has also increased preparations for a potential blockade or military action against Taiwan, which has stirred increasing concern among military leaders, diplomats and elected officials in the U.S., Taiwan's key ally.

The surveillance balloon was first reported by NBC News.

From an office window in Billings, Montana, Chase Doak said he saw a "big white circle in the sky" that he said was too small to be the moon.

"I thought maybe it was a legitimate UFO," Doak said. "So I wanted to make sure I documented it and took as many photos as I could."

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