

Biden Bullies China. But It Won't Work

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Global Research, February 09, 2023

[Indian Punchline](#) 6 February 2023

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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There is no question that the circumstances surrounding the "balloon affair" between the United States and China are dodgy. Burlesque does not belong to China's diplomatic toolbox. China never used balloons to browbeat adversaries.

Unsurprisingly, expert opinion largely tends to go along with the Chinese contention, which implies that Beijing had no need to resort to such outmoded and difficult-to-control means such as a gas-filled balloon hoisted at 60000 feet above ground propelled by the winds to conduct surveillance over America's super secret nuclear weapon sites when it has as sophisticated means as Americans would have to spy other countries through satellites. That seems a credible rationale, isn't it?

The big question is, can the balloon affair be the work of Vayu, the Hindu god of the winds, who in Indian mythology also is believed to act at times as the divine messenger of the gods?

Seriously, Beijing insists that a Chinese company's weather test balloon "with limited self-steering capability" deviated far from its planned course and was blown by winds across North America sometime early last week.

From available details, Pentagon was all along tracking that wayward balloon and, in fact, President Biden was kept informed, who had promptly ordered it to be shot down, but inexplicably, nothing was done for days until on Saturday, as it drifted off the US' east coast heading toward the vast Atlantic Ocean, it was brought down in a blaze of media publicity.

However, a day earlier, on Friday, the White House abruptly announced the postponement of a major two-day visit to Beijing by Secretary of State Antony Blinken (during which he was expected to meet President Xi Jinping.)

Biden took these extreme steps despite China's plea that this was "entirely an unexpected situation caused by *force majeure* and the facts are very clear" and Beijing, in fact, even expressed "regret" (which is tantamount to an *amende honorable*, as the French would

say.)

Furthermore, there was even a conversation on Friday between Blinken and Wang Yi, director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China Central Committee. [Beijing's readout](#) noted that the two top officials "communicated with each other on how to deal with a chance occurrence in a calm and professional manner."

The initial Chinese Foreign Ministry press releases ([here](#) and [here](#)) were in a manifestly conciliatory spirit. But Blinken chose to do some grandstanding and took a [tough posturing](#) calling it "an irresponsible act and a clear violation of US sovereignty and international law that undermined the purpose" of his forthcoming trip to Beijing.

According to a [Xinhua news agency report](#), the Chinese Foreign Ministry since expressed "strong dissatisfaction and opposition towards the US use of force to attack China's civilian unmanned airship" and flagged that the "Chinese side had clearly asked the US side to properly handle the matter in a calm, professional and restrained manner."

The Chinese Foreign Ministry added, "Under such circumstances, the US use of force is a clear overreaction and a serious violation of international practice. China will resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the company concerned, and reserve the right to make further responses if necessary."

All in all, to borrow the Biblical metaphor, "the cloud as small as a man's hand rising out of the sea" turned out to be a torrent on the way. That's where the real danger lies. The Biden Administration is already "over-militarising" the US-China relationship, as pointed out thoughtfully by Harlan Ullman, a noted author and senior advisor at the Atlantic Council, recently. ([Is the US over-militarising its China strategy?](#))

The Biden Administration estimates that it has garnered a valuable chip by putting China on the wrong foot and ratcheting up tensions. In the language of gambling, Biden considered himself an "advantage player" who can choose to do nothing, or play the chip and run.

The balloon affair is not without potential to be inflated to trigger a confrontation with China, but Biden might prefer to use it to intimidate Beijing and to create the backdrop for the impending landing of the [NATO in the Asia-Pacific region](#).

In the first ever Asian tour by the alliance's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg sharply criticised China on Tuesday, from Tokyo, for "bullying its neighbours and threatening Taiwan" and forewarning that "transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security is deeply interconnected."

Equally, it just cannot be a coincidence that out of the blue, the [Wall Street Journal in an exclusive report](#) on Sunday, seemingly unrelated to the balloon affair, alleged that China "is providing technology that Moscow's military needs to prosecute the Kremlin's war in Ukraine despite an international cordon of sanctions and export controls."

The report claims that available "customs data show Chinese state-owned defence companies shipping navigation equipment, jamming technology and fighter-jet parts to sanctioned Russian government-owned defence companies."

The Journal based its report entirely on customs data provided by [C4ADS](#), "a Washington-

based [nonprofit that specializes in identifying national-security threats](#)“, which is of course distinguishable as a proxy of the US intelligence.

Rivals and partners

Simply put, Beijing is being threatened from all sides that Biden would now have the nuclear option to rally the entire “collective West” and start piling sanctions against China even if Xi Jinping keeps the strategic restraint not to invade Taiwan.

An [editorial today in China Daily](#), the official newspaper, on Stoltenberg’s Asian trip takes note that his thesis of transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security being Siamese twins and the proposition that Russia and China form an evil axis threatening the rules-based international order “is something strategists in Washington are trying hard to peddle around the world.”

To cap it all, the Stoltenberg visit, the balloon affair and the ensuing media build-up, and, most important, the Blinken trip to China (where he was reportedly to meet President Xi Jinping in what was touted by the Biden Administration as an effort to build a “floor for the relationship”) — all these also coincide with an important round of consultation in Moscow on Friday by [Ma Zhaoxu](#) who was recently promoted to a full ministerial position to oversee the daily affairs of the Chinese foreign ministry.

The [Foreign Ministry readout](#) in Moscow (in Russian) on Ma’s consultations in Moscow stated that the two sides “carefully considered” their bilateral cooperation in the UN area — Ma is a former UN envoy — and went on to say that he and his Russian counterpart deputy foreign minister Sergey Vershinin “paid special attention to persistent attempts by representatives of some countries to undermine the authority of the UN by using its platform to put pressure on sovereign states, as well as creating alternative and inclusive mechanisms outside the framework of the Organization in line with the concept of a ‘rules-based world order.’ ”

Another meeting by Ambassador Ma with Russian DFM Andrey Rudenko “highly assessed” the Sino-Russian relations, confirmed “the mutual commitment to their gradual development” and discussed the “prospects for expanding bilateral ties in 2023.” ([here](#))

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also received Ma Zhaoxu. Notably, the [Russian Foreign Ministry press release](#) highlighted that “They noted their rejection of confrontational policies, as well as attempts by individual countries to interfere in the internal affairs of other states, or to restrain their development by imposing sanctions and other illegitimate methods. The officials reaffirmed their intention to reliably defend the sovereignty, security, and development interests of the two countries, and to build together a more just and democratic multipolar world order.”

Evidently, the Biden Administration realised that one main objective of Blinken’s trip to Beijing — ie., to weaken the Sino-Russian axis — was going to be a non-starter. The US’ sustained efforts to turn the Ukraine conflict as a tool to sabotage China-Russia relations have failed spectacularly. The economic and military ties between Beijing and Moscow are only growing stronger. President Xi Jinping’s expected visit to Russia in spring heralds the steady upward trajectory of in the “no limits” partnership.

Lavrov captured the verve of the Russian-Chinese partnership when he [said in a TV interview](#) on Friday that “although we do not create a military alliance, our relations are of a higher quality than military alliances in their classic sense, and they have no bounds or

limits. And there are no taboo topics either. They are indeed the best in the history of both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and the Russian Federation.”

In reality, Russia and China are optimally acting out of their national interests. Thus, Russia sees the US as an “enemy” that (foolishly) seeks its destruction and dismemberment, while the US, for China, is but a rival and potential opponent. A Moscow pundit Dmitri Trenin caught the subtle nuances recently when he wrote,

“This is not enough to form a military alliance between Moscow and Beijing. China naturally values its economic interests in US and European markets, and Beijing may change its mind in favour of a military alliance only if Washington becomes its enemy. For the sake of Russia alone, China is not willing to take this step.”

The balloon affair can be regarded as a defining moment. It exposes that while China was approaching Blinken's visit in good faith with the purpose of finding constructive ways forward, Washington didn't view things the same way. That said, Beijing was under no illusions, either. A CGTN video clipping Friday was titled *Blinken's visit to China: A candid talk or political tactics?*

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