

Pentagon: Chinese Spy Balloon Spotted over Western US

The U.S. is tracking a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon that has been spotted over U.S. airspace for a couple days, but the Pentagon decided not to shoot it down over concerns of hurting people on the ground, officials said Thursday. The discovery of the balloon puts a further strain on relations at a time of heightened tensions.

A senior defense official told Pentagon reporters that the U.S. has “very high confidence” it is a Chinese high-altitude balloon and it was flying over sensitive sites to collect information. One of the places the balloon was spotted was Montana, which is home to one of the nation’s three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information.

Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, provided a brief statement on the issue, saying the government continues to track the balloon. He said it 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.”

He said similar balloon activity has been seen in the past several years. He added that the U.S. took steps to ensure it did not collect sensitive information.

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

The incident comes as Secretary of State Antony Blinken was supposed to make his first trip to Beijing, expected this weekend, to try to find some common ground. Although the trip has not been formally announced, both Beijing and Washington have been talking about his imminent arrival.

It was not immediately clear if the discovery of the balloon would impact Blinken’s travel plans.

The senior defense official said the U.S. did get fighter jets, including F-22s, ready to shoot down the balloon if ordered to by the White House. 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 the military was doing to prevent it from collecting sensitive information or what will happen with the balloon if it isn’t shot down.

In a letter sent Thursday to Austin, Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., wrote: “The fact that this balloon was occupying Montana airspace creates significant concern that Malmstrom Air Force Base and the United States’ intercontinental ballistic missile fields are the target of this intelligence gathering mission. ... It is vital to establish the flight path of this balloon, any compromised U.S. national security assets, and all telecom or IT infrastructure on the ground within the U.S. that this spy balloon was utilizing.”

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 China

intelligence it couldn't already collect by other means, such through spy satellites.

The official would not specify the size of the balloon, but said it was large enough that despite its high altitude, commercial pilots could see it. 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. {eoa}

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