

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Wednesday, February 8, 2023.



Opinion

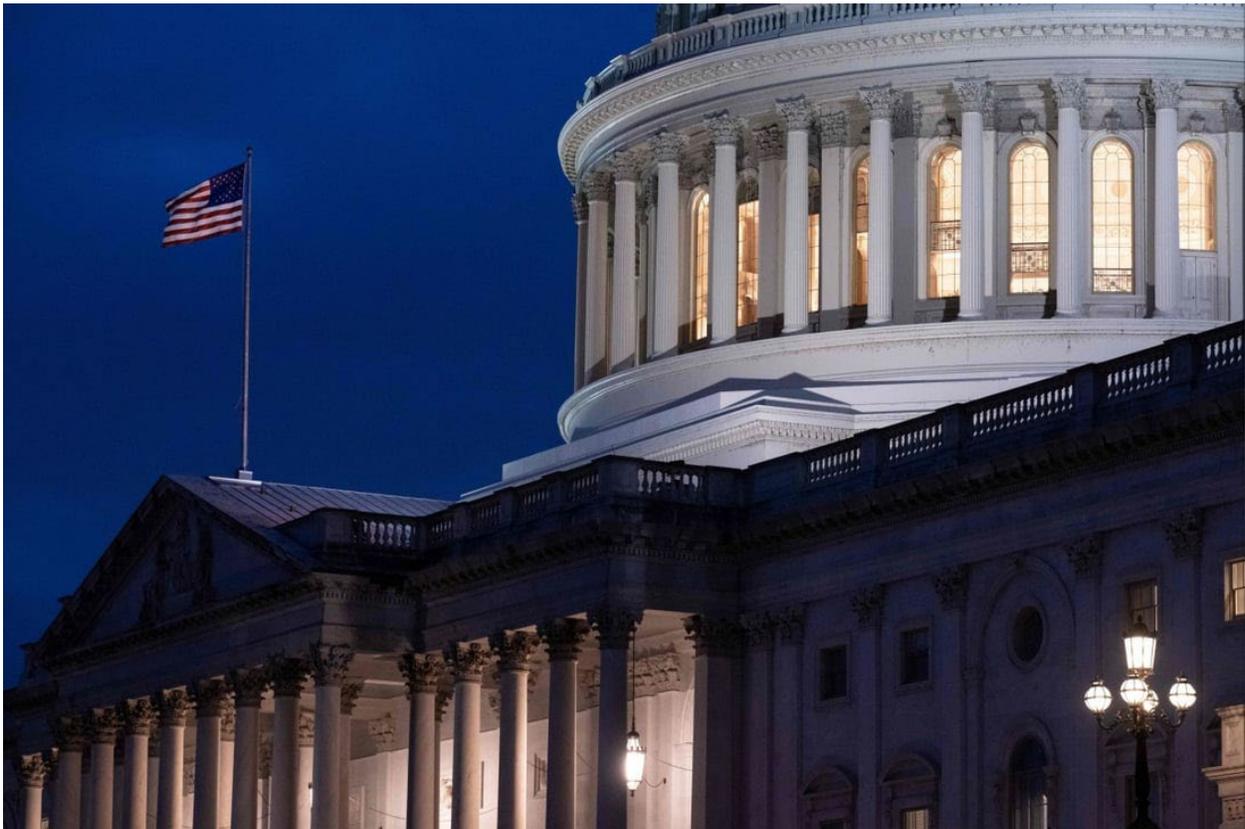
‘Spy balloon’ has darkened diplomatic skies over US and China



- The predictable outrage from China hawks in Washington over the suspected spy balloon has pushed Biden into another political corner
- A wholly avoidable blunder on Beijing’s side, the incident has for now deflated hopes of de-escalating US-China tensions

Tom Plate

Published: 1:30am, 8 Feb, 2023



The US Capitol in Washington, US, on February 6, ahead of US President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address on February 7. Photo: AFP

Hot air propels not just balloons. Embattled US President Joe Biden and his battle-prone Washington – the American capital more divided, presumably, than that of President Xi Jinping’s Beijing – are due to clash anew this week at the [US State of the Union address](#).

Unlike the superficial serenity of a national party congress in Beijing, where delegates commune with the leader in respectful Confucian fashion, the cavernous House of Representatives, packing in both

Senate and House members for the special annual event, will more resemble a farmer's barn of hooting owls and braying animals than of an exemplary chamber of a putatively premier legislature.

Outside the Congress building, a malaise of restless Americans will await. Even as, in time, public memory of the hapless Chinese [reconnaissance/spy balloon](#) blows away, the animus of partisan hot air poisoning public opinion will hover over US politics like a continual political smog warning. China, we shall see, will be found guilty yet again.

Poor Biden is up against it. His fearful Democrats escaped an expected midterm shellacking late last year, but in less than two years face the ordeal of pivotal presidential as well as congressional elections. For those Americans who hate China even more than they loathe Democrats, the spy balloon should have been [shot down](#) at very first sight – not in due course. In the current hatefulness, prudence and restraint prove politically risky.

Do seriously influential sectors within both superpowers desire war? Some gung-ho warriors on both sides of the Pacific Ocean do appear to be locked and loaded for action; certainly, the beaks of these hawks do not stay wrapped up.

Veteran US military leaders who should know better blithely flap the wings of war at Beijing. A former US Indo-Pacific Command admiral [predicts](#) a mainland military thrust into Taiwan probably within the next handful of years. Ditto the current admiral in charge of US Naval operations – “potentially in a 2023 window,” [he says](#).

The penchant for pessimistic prediction edges toward paranoia. No one needs to be woken up about China's rising capabilities; we are not unsoundly asleep regarding its impressive naval build-up. Yet many seem to be losing sleep over the “China threat” – an unhealthy obsession for which you can also thank a parallelism of Chinese wolf-warriors.

And so, an unfunny thing has happened on the way to an optimistically projected [de-tensioning turn](#) in the Sino-US relationship. A big bad balloon darkens the diplomatic skies. Beijing is leaning towards [silencing the wolves](#), reports have it; for, in the face of an array of nasty US initiatives designed not to make China great again, its economy looks to be in trouble. A reset in the making?

The US – or at least reasonable sectors of its otherwise set-in-cement foreign-policy establishment – was said to comprehend, finally, that “containing” China, even if practical (it is not), is less a policy than a prescription for friction. Perhaps a truer sense of where we really are instead of where we should be was surfacing. Simply repeating the old tropes and lessons of the Cold War won't get us to a better bilateral future.

The contours of a proper superpower policy can be shaped by common-sense principles. The first is the absolute need to avoid the risk of nuclear warfare. Seriously, anyone who requires persuasion on this point should seek psychiatric help.

The second is that both economies will benefit – even after all the predictable cheating (mutual) and legerdemain (mutual) and misunderstanding (cultural) – to the extent that they remain transactionally functional with one another. After all, add the two economies together and that's well over a third of the global economy. Stuff them into a wrought-iron coffin of economic warfare and you have a masterly template for [global depression](#).

The bottom line is that, just as China is trying to get its superpower act together, the US is trying to hold dearly onto its superpower status. Both goals are achievable only if the two are not trying to crush the other from here to eternity.

Instead of referring you to some foreign-policy expert to nail down this point, permit me the eccentricity of quoting a legendary Hollywood sage, David Niven, whose 1971 memoir had the title *The Moon's a Balloon*: "Looking at a problem the same way over and over again," he pointed out, "is entirely unproductive."

Yet here we are. Whatever clan was behind the balloon surveillance mission, whoever authorised the continuation of that operation from the mainland, you have to say – at least in retrospect – were two Beijing blokes possibly with the Chinese equivalent monikers of Dumb and Dumber.

But how about the US reaching into its cowboy gun holster for its F-22 Raptor fighter jet to shoot it down? Trigger-happy Americana, sure, but once the balloon drifted into the jet stream of the lead story on CNN, and just about everywhere else, what choice would any American president (of any political party) have but to order it to be shot down?

Get a grip on reality, Beijing. Upgrade your game. This has turned into a big bad balloon for a misbegotten relationship.

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