



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Who launched the balloon? Lazy bureaucracy or Beijing hawks?



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had no other option but to cancel his visit to China where he was supposed to travel on Friday.

This was more a matter of diplomatic routine than a complex political decision, because it is hard to imagine holding meetings at this level when one of the parties has violated the territorial integrity of the other.

The alternative decision, for Blinken to travel to Beijing at a time when the Chinese balloon was still floating over sensitive US military installations, would have been absurd.

The political pressure to which Joe Biden's administration was exposed left it with only one option: cancelling Blinken's visit to China and shooting down the balloon.

However, after the incident, the door remained wide open for the US-China dialogue, which was probably only put on hold with this incident.

Both sides tried to prevent dialogue returning to the level where they needed to start from scratch due to the balloon incident.

Beijing apologised for the incident, although it maintained the position that the balloon had a civilian and meteorological mission, not military or espionage.

Blinken said that the visit to Beijing was "postponed" and not "cancelled", which means that a new visit is just a matter of time and not a new political decision.

He informed the head of Chinese diplomacy, Wang Yi, about the postponement of the visit personally, in a telephone conversation, which means that the channels of communication at the highest level remain open and functioning until the next opportunity for a meeting.

Accelerated thawing of relations has been stopped

Governments, both in Beijing and in

Washington, have been working to de-escalate mutual tensions. The meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Indonesia on November 14 determined that course, with assurances from the Chinese leader that he would not attack Taiwan, and Biden's statement that China and the US do not need a new cold war.

Blinken's visit to Beijing was supposed to be an important follow-up to the implementation of this joint strategy. In order to prepare it, a diplomatic delegation from the US visited Beijing last December.

China's motives for de-escalating tensions with the US are primarily economic, given the shift after the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party last October, and the lifting of the three-year lockdown, in order to recover its national economy urgently.

The US wants to remain a partner in that Chinese shift, in addition to its interest in reducing the growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. The US wants to keep China as far away as possible from its partnership with Russia through better relations with Beijing.

The spy balloon over the US has slowed the thawing of relations. The postponement of Blinken's visit to Beijing is only the first consequence of the incident.

Who had the motive to send the balloon over the US territory?

It is not likely that the balloon provocation was part of Beijing's elaborate state strategy. The state leadership wants to continue a high-level dialogue with Washington, so the motives for sending a spy balloon over US territory at this very moment should be sought elsewhere.

One motive could be found in the vertical communications of the authoritarian structures in the Chinese government, where some decision-making levels may not have understood well enough that a shift and rapprochement with the US was under way, so

they continued as before. Amongst other things, by sending spy devices over US soil.

renewed tensions.

Beijing showed a desire for this to be the main interpretation, because the head of the national meteorological service was dismissed during the incident. This also supports the official position that it was a civilian meteorological balloon and not a spy device.

Another motive could be found in the Chinese establishment structures, which do not like the current shift towards the US, and are powerful enough to cause at least a halt to any thawing of relations, if not its complete cessation.

The US reaction to the appearance of the Chinese spy satellite was predictable. The administration had to make the decision to shoot it down, under strong pressure from Republicans that the country's territorial integrity was under threat.

The Beijing hawks could count on that in forming a strategy to disrupt the course of normalisation of relations quickly and effectively. The balloon over the US and Blinken's visit to Beijing were an ideal solution for achieving this.

"The leadership of China does not cast an all powerful eye across the vastness of China. Its bureaucracy can be flabby and slow, instructions do not always cascade neatly out, orders are not automatically followed. There are some questions as to whether the balloon was timed deliberately or a clumsy mistake", concluded Rosalind Mathieson from Bloomberg.

Following the balloon incident, Joe Biden's annual State of the Nation Address must have been subject to some changes.

Changes will not only be technical, where the decisiveness of the reaction of the US to the hostile China will be emphasised. It will be the first post-balloon signal of whether relations with China will continue to move in the direction established with Xi, or whether the two countries are entering a period of