



China Threatens U.S. With Sanctions Over Shooting Down of “Spy Balloon”

SINGAPORE — On February 15, China threatened to penalize the United States by adopting “countermeasures” against it for the downing of its massive balloon that the Pentagon claimed was being used to spy on sensitive military sites.

Beijing has reiterated that the U.S. “overreacted” by shooting down the high-altitude balloon over the Atlantic Ocean with a missile launched from an F-22 Raptor earlier this month.

“China is strongly opposed to this and will take countermeasures in accordance with law against relevant US entities that have undermined China’s sovereignty and security to firmly safeguard China’s sovereignty and legitimate rights and interests,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin declared during a press briefing.

Wenbin did not elaborate on the “countermeasures” that Beijing would take, but blamed the U.S. for leveraging on the balloon incident “as an excuse to impose illegal sanctions over Chinese companies and institutions.”

Following the February 4 downing of the balloon, the Biden administration said that the Chinese military has attempted to spy on over 40 countries across five continents with balloons like the one the U.S. shot down.

The U.S. imposed sanctions on six Chinese entities “for supporting” Beijing’s “military modernization efforts, specifically those related to aerospace programs, including airships and balloons.”

While Beijing has admitted that the downed balloon belonged to China, it has maintained that it was a weather balloon that blew off track. “We are firmly opposed to what the US has done and urge the US not to take further actions that could undermine China’s interests or escalate tensions,” Wenbin said. He further urged that the America “stop smearing and attacking China and stop misleading the US public and the international community.” “China reserves the right to further respond if necessary,” he told reporters.

A China specialist told *Insider* that the balloon that floated above America and triggered a diplomatic crisis was a “clumsy” move by Beijing that “put a missile” through an already frosty relationship with the United States. The incident symbolized “for everyone in the world, particularly in America, that we are in an increasingly hostile relationship,” said Orville Schell, director of the Center on U.S.-China



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Relations at the Asia Society in New York.

Meanwhile, China said it would restrict the scope of a blacklist used to sanction foreign companies after using the tool for the first time against two U.S. defense firms.

The measure “is strictly limited and aimed at very few foreign entities breaking the law,” the Ministry of Commerce in Beijing said in a question-and-answer document on Friday, after Lockheed Martin Corp and a subsidiary of Raytheon Technologies Corp were included in a list of “unreliable entities” for selling weapons to Taiwan. “The scope will not be expanded at will, and there is no need for foreign-invested enterprises to worry.”

The pledge seems to be an attempt to assure international investors that their interests would not likely be undermined by this legal tool that China created in 2019 as it conducted a trade war with the U.S. after the U.S. added Huawei Technologies to a Commerce Department blacklist.

Gabriel Wildau, managing director at advisory firm Teneo Holdings LLC, said he doubted China would proactively lengthen the unreliable entities list because it regards the U.S. business community as an ally.

“They want to cultivate the US business community as a political constituency that opposes pro-decoupling policies, so alienating US companies would be a self-inflicted wound. It’s notable that the action against Raytheon doesn’t appear to include their civil aviation units, which do have significant mainland China operations and which the Chinese authorities value as a source of advanced technology,” he continued.

Earlier, the United States included six Chinese companies in an export blacklist over what it claims are relations to a military-backed global balloon espionage program.

China claimed that the balloon the U.S. downed in early February was a civilian airship that was garnering weather data when it was blown off course, stating that the U.S. overreacted to the situation.

China has not said explicitly whether the sanctions on Lockheed and Raytheon were linked to the balloon dispute, but the language in the announcement reeked of Wang’s aforementioned remarks expressing Chinese displeasure at the U.S.

“This looks very much like a tit-for-tat response to the US measures imposed in the wake of the spy balloon incident,” said Noah Barkin, managing editor of the Rhodium Group’s China practice.

In his first extended attempt to publicly address the episode, U.S. President Joe Biden sought to allay fears about the alleged Chinese spy balloon and the downing of three other objects over the U.S. in recent weeks. He also added that he intends to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping to reduce tensions stoked by the outcry.

Craig Singleton, a China specialist at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, asserted that such balloons had been broadly used by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and were a low-cost intelligence gathering method.

Spy balloons have hovered over the U.S. several times in recent years, but this one seemed to be hovering longer than before, an official admitted. “Currently, we assess that this balloon has limited additive value from an intelligence collection perspective, but we are taking steps nevertheless to protect against foreign intelligence collection of sensitive information.”

Security analyst Alexander Neill, an adjunct fellow at Hawaii’s Pacific Forum think tank, agreed that



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while the balloon was likely to plummet China-U.S. ties even more, it was likely of limited intelligence value compared with other elements of China's state-of-the-art military. "China has its own constellation of spy and military satellites that are far more important and effective in terms of watching the US, so I think it is a fair assumption that the intelligence gain is not huge."



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