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The shooting down of a Chinese surveillance balloon by the U.S. military has served as a stark reminder of the deep distrust that characterises relations between the world's two biggest powers. The detection of the balloon last week over Montana sparked a diplomatic crisis, leading to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling off a highly anticipated visit to China from February 6. The visit, which would have been the first by a top U.S. diplomat since 2018, was the result of a months-long effort to halt the downward spiral in ties, coming out of the Biden-Xi meet in November at the G-20 Bali summit. The fragility of that effort has been laid bare by the controversy over the balloon, which has punctured the process of restoring stability in relations that have been marred by growing discord. Beijing has maintained that the balloon was "civilian" (meteorology), but had drifted off-course. It also slammed the move to shoot it down as an overreaction. The U.S. has seen the deployment of what it called a surveillance balloon, on the eve of the Blinken visit, deep into its airspace as a grave provocation — one, it pointed out, that Beijing too would not have tolerated.

U.S. officials have acknowledged this was by no means the first such surveillance balloon spotted over American skies; there was a similar incident under the Trump administration. Balloons were also spotted over Japan in 2020 and 2021, and over India's Andaman Islands last year. All three governments did not take steps to shoot down the balloons, presumably coming to the conclusion that the balloons, in the age of intelligence powered by advanced satellites, were not important enough to warrant being shot down. New Delhi and Tokyo may now be prompted to reassess how they handle such intrusions in the future. Beijing, for its part, would do well to reconsider the benefits and costs of what appears to be a new, and provocative, tool for intelligence-gathering. It is conceivable that the Biden administration may have allowed the balloon to quietly drift away had it not been spotted in Montana. The Biden administration faced intense criticism at home for not shooting down the balloon earlier. Its response, including cancelling the Blinken visit, reflects how China has become a hot-button issue in U.S. politics. This development has constrained how a key relationship is managed. In 2001, the U.S. and China were able to dial down tensions after a collision between a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet over Hainan island in China. Should a similar crisis now arise, particularly against the charged backdrop of an intensifying rivalry, muscle-flexing over Taiwan, and a heated domestic discourse, finding an off-ramp will be far more difficult.

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