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CIA chief made secret visit to China in bid to thaw relations

Bill Burns' trip last month was most senior to Beijing by Biden administration official



CIA director Bill Burns met counterparts in Beijing © Bill Clark/Getty Images

Demetri Sevastopulo in Singapore AN HOUR AGO

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CIA director Bill Burns travelled to China last month, a clandestine visit by one of President Joe Biden's most trusted officials that signals how concerned the White House had become about deteriorating relations between Beijing and Washington.

Five people familiar with the situation said Burns, a former top diplomat who is [frequently entrusted with delicate overseas missions](#), travelled to China for talks with officials.

The visit, the most senior to China by a Biden administration official, comes as Washington pushes for high-level engagements with Beijing to try to stabilise the [relationship](#).

The White House and CIA declined to comment. But one US official said Burns met Chinese intelligence officials during the trip.

“Last month, director Burns travelled to Beijing where he met with Chinese counterparts and emphasised the importance of maintaining open lines of communications in intelligence channels,” said the US official.

Burns' mission took place in the same month US [national security adviser Jake Sullivan met Wang Yi, China's top foreign policy official](#), in Vienna. The White House did not announce that meeting until it had concluded.

Burns' trip was also the highest-level visit to China by a US official since deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman went to Tianjin in July 2021.

Biden has on several occasions asked the CIA director to conduct delicate missions, at home and overseas. Burns travelled to Moscow in November 2021 to warn Russian officials not to invade Ukraine.

Several people familiar with the situation said Biden last year sent Burns to Capitol Hill in an effort to persuade then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi not to travel to Taiwan.

The White House has been trying to kick-start exchanges with China after a particularly turbulent period that started in February when a [suspected Chinese spy balloon flew over North America](#). The incident derailed an effort to set “a floor” under the relationship that Biden and Chinese president Xi Jinping had agreed was necessary when they met at the G20 in Bali in November.

Biden last month said he expected an imminent “thaw” in relations without providing any detail. Burns travelled to [China](#) before Biden made the comment at a G7 summit in Hiroshima.

“As both an experienced diplomat and senior intelligence official, Burns is uniquely placed to engage in a dialogue that can potentially contribute to the Biden administration’s objective of stabilising ties and putting a floor under the relationship,” said Bonnie Glaser, a China expert at the German Marshall Fund.

Paul Haenle, a former top White House China official, said one advantage of sending Burns was that he was respected by Democrats and Republicans and also well known to Chinese officials.

“They know him as a trusted interlocutor. They would welcome the opportunity to engage him quietly behind the scenes,” said Haenle, now director of the Carnegie China think-tank. “They will see a quiet discreet engagement with Burns as a perfect opportunity.”

While Burns is widely viewed as one of the most trusted figures in the US government, his trip continues a tradition of CIA directors being used for sensitive missions.

“CIA directors have a long history of secret diplomacy. They are able to travel in complete secrecy and often have strong relationships with the host intelligence services built over time,” said Dennis Wilder, a former CIA China expert who also served as the top White House Asia official during the George W Bush administration.

The US has been trying to resurrect a trip to China that secretary of state Antony Blinken abruptly cancelled over the balloon incident, but Beijing has so far refused to give it a green light.

Chinese defence minister Li Shangfu has also refused to meet US defence secretary Lloyd Austin in Singapore this weekend because Washington has refused to lift sanctions on him. The two men are attending the Shangri-La Dialogue security conference where they are slated to give speeches.

While the two ministers were not expected to have a formal meeting, the Pentagon said they “spoke briefly” at the opening dinner of the forum, which is held by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“The two leaders shook hands, but did not have a substantive exchange,” the Pentagon said.

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