

Air traffic, new apple of discord between Washington and Beijing

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Body

China on Thursday announced a very limited resumption of international flights next week, following a threat from Washington to suspend flights from Chinese carriers in the United States, in the context of new tensions between the two powers.

China, the first country affected by the new coronavirus, drastically reduced its air links to the rest of the world in late March for fear of further contagion from abroad.

Beijing allowed airlines to fly a week to and from a foreign country, but based on a list of active airlines as of March 12. However, many foreign companies, especially Americans, were no longer flying to China at that time because of the pandemic.

In fact, only four Chinese airlines currently operate flights between the United States and China, and no U.S. airlines. Washington sees it as an obstacle to competition.

In late March, the Asian giant also closed its borders to all visa holders and even residence permits.

And many still remain stranded abroad and cannot return to China after their departure during the most dramatic moment of the epidemic.

However, the country recently authorized the return to droppers of some citizens -- Korean, German and Singaporeans -- whose presence is essential to economic recovery.

As of June 8, all airlines will be able to operate one flight per week to and from China, including those no longer flying on March 12, the China Air Traffic Regulatory Authority (CAAC) said in a statement.

- Violation of the agreement -

Upon arrival on Chinese territory passengers will undergo a test, CAAC said.

Airlines will be able to get a second weekly flight if none of the passengers test positive for the covid-19 for three weeks on the same route.

The move comes a day after US President Donald Trump's administration announced the upcoming suspension of Chinese airline flights bound for the United States, in an already very tense context between Beijing and Washington.

The suspension will apply from June 16, but it could start to rule earlier if Trump orders it.

The interdiction will affect seven Chinese carriers, including giants such as Air China and China Eastern Airlines, but excludes cargo planes.

"U.S. airlines called for a restart of passenger service from June 1. China's government's refusal to approve such requests is a violation of our Air Transportation Agreement," the U.S. Department of Transportation said in a note.

Delta Air Lines and United Airlines suspended flights to and from China in February and March due to the pandemic and in compliance with travel restrictions announced in early February by the U.S. government.

- "Guarantee of equity" -

But both companies, however, wanted to resume activity in China this month.

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U.S. retaliation has been well received by Airlines for America, the industry lobby, seeing it as a means to ensure "equity" and healthy competition.

Before the epidemic, earlier this year, U.S. and Chinese airlines operated about 325 flights a week between the two countries.

However, Washington was told Wednesday willing to overturn its decision if Beijing gestures in favor of American companies. If China adjusts its policy, the government is "fully" prepared to "re-examine the decision."

Chinese-American relations have deteriorated in recent weeks with the multiplication of disagreements, including the Hong Kong issue.

China wants to impose on semi-autonomous territory as a security law that has provoked widespread international protests.

The United States now considers that the territory no longer benefits from Beijing's promised autonomy and began to revise the preferential status it had bestowed on that major financial center.

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