

Ballooning Paranoia: The China Threat Hits the Skies

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Hysteria over balloons is a strange thing. Hot air balloons made their appearance during the Napoleonic era, where they served as delivery weapons for bombs and undertook surveillance tasks. High altitude balloons were also used by, of all powers, the United States during the 1950s, for reasons of gathering intelligence, though these were shot down by the irritated Soviets. Somehow, the US imperium and its noisy choristers have managed to get worked up over a solitary Chinese balloon that traversed the United States for over a week before it was shot down by the US Air Force.

On January 28, a device reported to be a "high-altitude surveillance balloon" entered US airspace in Alaska. It then had a brief spell in Canadian airspace before returning to the US via Idaho on January 31. On February 4, with the balloon moving off the coast of South Carolina, a [decision was made](#) by the US military to shoot it down using a F-22 Raptor from the 1st Fighter Wing based at Langley Air Force Base. The Pentagon has revealed that the collecting of debris is underway.

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [issued a stern note](#) of disapproval, protesting "the US attack on a civilian unmanned airship by force." This was "a clear overreaction and a serious violation of international practice." Beijing also issued a note of apology, regretting "the unintended entry of the ship into US airspace due to force majeure."

A US State Department official, while noting the statement of regret, felt compelled to [designate](#) "the presence of this balloon in our airspace [as] a clear violation of our sovereignty as well as international law".

Rumours of a second Chinese balloon flying across Latin America were also [confirmed](#) by a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry on February 6, who described it as being "of a civilian nature and is used for flight tests." The instrument had been impaired by weather in its direction, having "limited self-control capabilities".

The Pentagon's press secretary, Brigadier General Pat Ryder, [also confirmed](#) the existence of the second balloon, reaching the predictably opposite conclusion to his Chinese counterparts. "We are seeing reports of a balloon transiting Latin America. We now assess it is another Chinese surveillance balloon."

This overegged saga has seen much airtime and column space dedicated to those in the pay of the military-defence complex. Little thought was given about the purpose of such a seemingly crude way of collecting military intelligence. Timothy Heath of the Rand Corporation went so far as to extol the merits of such cheeky devices. For one thing, they were hard to detect, making them somehow reliable.

General Glen VanHerck, commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command, [made reference](#) to a number of Chinese spy balloons that supposedly operated with impunity during the Trump administration. "I will tell you that we did not detect those threats." This had resulted in a "domain awareness gap that we have to figure out." At this writing, the begging bowl for even larger defence budgets is being pushed around the corridors of power.

Lawyers of international law have also had their say, reaching for their manuals, and shaking their heads gravely. Donald Rothwell of the Australian National University [thought](#) that "the incursion of the Chinese balloon tested the boundaries of international law."

Thankfully, one or two sober notes of reflection have prevailed, even from within the military-intelligence fraternity. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has issued a few self-evident truths. "Balloons are not an ideal platform for spying," [writes](#) James Andrew Lewis. "They are big and hard to hide. They go where the winds take them". Such instruments "would be a strange choice for a technologically advanced and sophisticated opponent."

This absurd spectacle has become the stuff of political bricks and straw for a Biden administration keen to push its stuttering election cart. Embroiled in his own classified documents scandal, President Joe Biden was put off his stroke about focusing on any announcement about running for a second term. Burnishing the China Threat was just the ticket.

In his [State of the Union Address](#), Biden paved the way for a number of rhetorical salvos against the Great Yellow Hordes he finds so threatening to the awesome majesty of US power. "Today, we're in the strongest position in decades to compete with China or anyone else in the world." In passing reference to the balloon, the president proved entertainingly, if absurdly belligerent: "as we made clear last week, if China threatens our sovereignty, we will act to protect our country. And we did." Such a response, and such a threat.

The Chinese explanation has been scoffed at and derisively dismissed. Yet balloons are an almost quotidian feature of scientific and meteorological work, whatever the official explanation offered by Beijing might be. NASA's own Scientific Balloon Program, for instance, has been most engaged of late. The organisation [was keen to tout](#) its fall 2022 campaign involving six scientific, engineering and student balloon flights in support of 17 missions.

The scale of any one mission can be sizeable. "Our balloon platforms," came the [description](#) from NASA's Scientific Balloon chief Debbie Fairbrother, "can lift several

thousand pounds to the edge of space, allowing for multiple, various scientific instruments, technologies, and education payloads to fly together in one balloon flight.”

The disproportionate nature of Washington’s reaction to Beijing over such balloons also looks rather odd in the face of vast surveillance technologies it deploys against adversaries and friends. But politics is not merely the art of the possible but an opportunity for the absurd to find form and voice. On this score, the mouse has clearly terrified the elephant.

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