

Violation of Airspace by Chinese Balloon Needs to be Condemned

Introduction

The recent incidence of the United States shooting a Chinese ‘civilian airship’ (as named by the Chinese) or high-altitude surveillance balloon (as stated by the US) raises many questions. This is not the first time that the Chinese have sent these balloons to the US, in the past during Trump’s administration “three other suspected Chinese spy balloons had transited the continental United States undetected”. It was undetected due to “domain awareness gaps”, this fact was mentioned by the Pentagon General, responsible for providing air and missile defense over North America[i]. This particular balloon which was successfully shot down by the American F-22 fighter jets was “200 feet tall, with a payload the size of a regional jet weighing over a couple of thousand pounds”[ii]. This incident shows that the aggressive policies of China under President *Xi Jinping* are continuing, in fact they are becoming more brazen, as the Chinese are now not hesitating even to test the US. The Americans on their part have also sent a clear signal, that they will react, if, their airspace is being violated, irrespective of what the nature of balloon may be, further, they will also be definitely analysing the debris to understand the character of these balloons. The other friendly nations would like America to share their analysed data with them, however, whether they do so or not is another matter, which needs to be seen.

Historical Aspect and Advantages of Spy Balloons

Spy balloons are not a new phenomenon, the United States had used high-altitude balloons in the 1950s, to spy on the then Soviet Union[iii]. However, with the technological advancements, newer more sophisticated reconnaissance and other spy satellites were invented, and the balloons were abandoned. The main reason for this was the limiting nature of these balloons, as they were dependent on the winds and were un-steerable, hence, they were not considered a smart choice for spying. It is already known that China has many spy satellites which gather significant information, as also the Chinese *modus operandi* when it comes to information gathering is multi-domain, which includes cyber, human intelligence along with satellites, so the question is, why did they go in for such an inferior technology, when they already have sophisticated technologies available? The reasons are multifarious. Firstly, they preferred to use these balloons because detecting these balloons through radar is difficult, because of their speed and altitude at which they fly, which is often close to earth’s lower stratosphere, nearly 60,000 feet (18,300 meters) and which is thankfully above the airspace required for commercial airliners, further, the nature of the balloons to drift, because of their dependence on the wind, makes it difficult for the military installations to depict and predict them. Secondly, the technology has improved their manoeuvrability, they can now hover around a sensitive area for a longer time and gather information in more detail, unlike the satellites which have a set pattern with a constant motion, thirdly, “simple cameras on balloons can produce clearer images than those on orbital satellites, as also other surveillance equipment in the balloon can pick up signals that do not reach the altitude of satellites”[iv]. Finally, they are easy to camouflage, and have dual use function. Thus, these balloons have a fair amount of advantage when it comes to surveillance. However, the major issue encountered by the nations, whose airspace they violate, is that there are no procedures which can ascertain whether these balloons are for meteorological purposes or it is for surveillance. No country will overtly declare that they are using these as a surveillance tool, further, with China there has been trust issues

also. So, Chinese saying that these balloons are for meteorological purposes is difficult to buy, in such a scenario it will only increase mistrust and escalate tensions, especially, if it were to fly over those countries where relations are tense. Further, it is a known fact that the Chinese are undergoing massive military modernisation with the sole aim to become a major power. They are developing niche and disruptive weapons and strategies to coerce their opponents, so they cannot be relied on.

Chinese Disruptive Strategies

To say that China under President Xi Jinping has become aggressive will be an understatement. China through her 'wolf warrior diplomacy', or the 'grey zone tactics or the creeping 'salami slicing tactics' on land, have tried in the past, to change the status quo in their favour. Further, in many global incidents, they have been adept in camouflaging their intent, the major example is the militarisation of the islands in the South China Sea. Thus, one can say that through these balloons the Chinese, have been cleverly expanding their unconventional tactics from land and sea to now space. In space traditionally, the Chinese have been using spy satellites but now these balloons in the garb of meteorological tools, have become another camouflaged idea to gather sensitive information from their adversaries. Further, as there has been a trust deficit, when it comes to China's relationship with countries of Indo-Pacific, hence, it is difficult to believe that these balloons are just for meteorological purposes, therefore, on violation of airspace the nations need to condemn China for this strategy.

Chinese Violation of Airspace Needs to be Condemned

Legally the Chinese are wrong in sending these balloons which violate the airspace of other countries and the fact that it could pass through the sensitive sites, as was evident in the case with the US, where it travelled over Montana Air Force Base, one of three bases that hosts nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile fields^[4] makes these manoeuvres, escalatory in nature. The US was right in shooting down this balloon, because types of these balloons have been placed in the category of aircrafts, hence the international Civil Aviation treaty could be applied to it. These balloons have been violating the airspace of many countries and it was left to USA to shoot it down. The question is not about it, being a civilian unmanned airship for meteorological purposes, as was stated by the Chinese, but the fact, that it can trespass other countries airspace and create undue tensions, this is a cause of concern. Consider the scenario if it passes through the airspace of those countries where the relationship is tense, what could be the consequence of such a manoeuvre? The Chinese reaction to US shooting was subdued, but if some other country would have shot it down, would the reaction been the same, or it would have led to more threatening and aggressive posturing. The repercussions even here are evident as far as US-China relations are concerned, as President Biden has cancelled his trip to China and the Chinese are continuing with the propaganda, of condemning the use of force by the US. Further, this incident is not a one alone incident there are reports that another balloon has also been sighted violating another country's airspace, so just saying that it was a force majeure accident, may not hold good, because these balloons are bound to drift because of its dependence on the wind. So, it is for nations to come forward and condemn these balloons and send a strong signal that any airspace violations in any country will have the same fate as was done by the US. This may prevent China from making it a regular strategy.

Implications for India

Condemning such violation of airspaces needs to be voiced, to prevent China from adopting these strategies as norms. Because, these balloons can not only gauge the surface targets more accurately but as mentioned by John K. Culver, a former senior intelligence officer at the Central Intelligence Agency “may include data on atmospheric conditions and also communications that could not be gleaned from outer space”^[vi]. Hence, to counter these, nations, need to develop better domain awareness, as was suggested by the US in previous paragraphs, and in case of India the intent too, to shoot these balloons if they violate our airspace, because India has the capabilities to shoot them. As also, India needs to have adequate information about the other ongoing and future projects of China. With US shooting this balloon a precedence has been set, now it is up to individual nations to adopt this method and nullify China’s this strategy of covert surveillance. China is bound to adopt many other such strategies in future which will require timely action.

End Notes

[i] [Natasha Bertrand](#) and Haley Britzky, Pentagon says it had an ‘awareness gap’ that led to failure to detect 3 Chinese balloons under Trump, CNN, February 6, 2023, AT <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/06/politics/pentagon-balloon-monday/index.html>

[ii] Ibid

[iii] James Andrew Lewis, “The Chinese Spy Balloons” The Sky is the Limit”, Centre for Strategic & International Studies, Feb 3, 2023, at [https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-spy-balloons-sky-limit#:~:text=Balloons were an important tool,complained and shot them down](https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-spy-balloons-sky-limit#:~:text=Balloons%20were%20an%20important%20tool,complained%20and%20shot%20them%20down)).

[iv] [Julian E. Barnes](#), [Edward Wong](#), [Helene Cooper](#) and [Chris Buckley](#), *China Sends Spy Balloons Over Military Sites Worldwide, U.S. Officials Say*, New Yoork Times, Februry,8, 2023, at [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/us/politics/china-spy-balloons.html#:~:text=The balloon flights%2C some officials,a conflict or rising tensions](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/us/politics/china-spy-balloons.html#:~:text=The%20balloon%20flights%2C%20some%20officials,a%20conflict%20or%20rising%20tensions).

[v] [W.J. Hennigan](#), “The Chinese Balloon Was Shot Down By the U.S. Military. Here’s How It Went Down”, The Time, February 05 ,2023 at <https://time.com/6253010/chinese-spy-balloon-shot-down/>

[vi] [Julian E. Barnes](#), [Edward Wong](#), [Helene Cooper](#) and [Chris Buckley](#), *China Sends Spy Balloons Over Military Sites Worldwide, U.S. Officials Say*, New Yoork Times, Februry,8, 2023, at [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/us/politics/china-spy-balloons.html#:~:text=The balloon flights%2C some officials,a conflict or rising tensions](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/us/politics/china-spy-balloons.html#:~:text=The%20balloon%20flights%2C%20some%20officials,a%20conflict%20or%20rising%20tensions).

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