

Chinese Spy Balloon Incident 2023

The US shot down a Chinese surveillance balloon that had floated over its airspace in February 2023. To this China reacted angrily because according to China it was a civilian airship used for meteorological research. Know more about this incident for the [UPSC exam](#).

What are Spy Balloons?

Spy balloons are high-altitude surveillance tools that usually operate at 80,000-120,000 feet well above the cruising altitude of commercial aircraft, to gather intelligence and carry out other military missions.

- A spy balloon is equipped with cameras and imaging devices to capture things of interest.
- Unlike satellites, balloons are economically viable.
- Spy balloons are able to widely scan an area from a close distance and capture clearer, high-resolution images of the target because of their proximity to the earth's surface.
- Spy balloons have the disadvantage that they are not directly steered, though they can be roughly guided by changing altitudes to catch different wind currents. Also, they are easily targeted.

Why is China interested in high-altitude balloons?

- Earlier China deployed balloons for surveillance with the use of Chinese lanterns. The lanterns were used for transmitting messages, spying and alerting allies. Subsequently, China has been working on developing advanced balloon technology.
- One of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) institutes in a recent paper highlighted that one of the useful military applications of balloons was to test enemy air defenses. It can induce and mobilize the enemy's air defense system, providing conditions for the implementation of electronic reconnaissance, assessment of air defense systems' early warning detection and operational response capabilities.
- It is also due to the low cost of using spy balloons that China is resorting to their use.

Spy Balloons Concerns

- **Concerns for the United States:**
 - A national security challenge for the U.S.
 - It will impact the internal politics of the country as China-related matters are gaining more traction with increasing competition between the two countries.
 - Will impact other aspects like military, economic, and technological competition with China.

- **Concerns for China:**
 - China is already on the back foot due to the [Russia-Ukraine War](#). And since the Pentagon has released an official statement highlighting China's intention of surveillance through balloons, this can further isolate China in the global platform.
- It will further deteriorate relations between the two superpowers.

Relevance of spy balloons in the present situation:

- The relevance of spy balloons has been reduced due to advancements in satellite, aircraft and drone technologies.
- However, spy balloons still have an important niche in the military domain as they do not require huge investments and sophisticated technologies.
- Also, the high-altitude spy balloons have the advantage of being able to hover around at lower heights at a slower pace as compared to satellites/aircraft/drones which allows balloons to take better quality photographs and also provide more time to gather information.

Lessons and Implications for India:

- India needs to be cautious of China's intentions because India is closer to the U.S. and it is part of [QUAD](#).
- India-China relations are also at an all-time low, especially after the Galwan clash. In this context, China can resort to low-cost options like using Pakistan against India.
- Spying through balloons is more challenging for India as a much larger region can be surveyed from the Chinese territory itself, especially in Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.
- China believes in dealing with India from a position of strength and India has been experiencing this since the 1950s. India should thus use all the available resources at its disposal to deter China.
- India should focus on economic growth as a strong economy would result in a strong military and it would be easy to counter China.
- The military should be modernized along with tactical preparedness on the cybersecurity front.