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# A Chinese Spy Balloon Is Flying High Over Montana. This Isn't Normal.

It's a clear violation of U.S. airspace. So why isn't the Pentagon shooting it down?

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PUBLISHED: FEB 3, 2023



picture alliance // Getty Images

- The U.S. government has confirmed a Chinese spy balloon is flying over Montana, a violation of American airspace.
- The balloon, which China has claimed is a weather device, traveled east across the Pacific Ocean.
- Exactly what the balloon is doing, and what it is meant to be doing, is unknown.

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The U.S. is actively tracking a high-altitude Chinese spy balloon that is flying over the continental United States. The U.S. government continues to track the surveillance balloon, which is currently over Montana, and has said it could even go so far as to shoot down the balloon. The true purpose of the reconnaissance balloon is unknown.

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balloon that is over the continental United States right now.” The statement also said Gen Glen VanHerck, NORAD commander, “assesses the balloon does not present a military or physical threat to people on the ground at this time.”



**Two Air Force F-22 Raptor fighters were scrambled earlier this week to intercept the balloon as it traveled over Montana.**

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fighters from Edwards Air Force Base in Nevada on February 1 to intercept the Chinese spy balloon, and considered shooting it down.

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“The balloon is currently traveling at altitude well over commercial air traffic,” NORAD added. In a February 3 press conference, Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder put the balloon’s altitude at 60,000 feet. Commercial airline traffic typically flies at an average of 35,000 feet, or about four miles below the balloon.

Ryder also mentioned that the Chinese spy balloon “has the ability to maneuver,” but did not elaborate.

In a previous [Pentagon news release](#), Brig. Gen. Ryder said that the U.S. government “acted immediately” to protect against the collection of sensitive information, though he didn’t detail what measures were taken.” The U.S. government also stated that the Chinese spy balloon traveled over “sensitive sites” in Montana, a likely allusion to the Minuteman III ICBM silos of the 341st Missile Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base.

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An ICBM undergoing programmed depot maintenance on a launch facility at Malmstrom Air Force Base, April 2017.

U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Delia Marchick

The Pentagon said the U.S. intelligence community has “very high confidence” that the spy balloon originated in China, and that U.S. officials have engaged with their Chinese counterparts “with urgency, through multiple channels” to resolve the balloon issue.

According to photos posted on social media, the Chinese spy balloon is white, and its payload includes solar panels. A senior Department of Defense declined to describe its size:

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“I can’t really go into the dimension—but there have been reports of pilots seeing this thing, even though it’s pretty high up in the sky. So ... it’s sizable.”

This is not the first balloon the U.S. has detected in the past. A Pentagon official says in a new release:

“It’s happened a handful of other times over the past few years, to include before this administration. It is appearing to hang out for a longer period of time, this time around, [and is] more persistent than in previous instances. That would be one distinguishing factor.”

It is not clear if the official means that previous balloons have intruded into U.S. airspace.

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Meteorologist Dan Satterfield [explained on Twitter](#) that he had used the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) HYSPLIT wind current prediction model to track the balloon back to its original source. The balloon traced back to Xinjiang, China.

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the balloon, taking responsibility but calling it “*force majeure*”—in diplomatic-speak, an extraordinary, unforeseeable accident:

“The airship is from China. It is a civilian airship used for research, mainly meteorological, purposes. Affected by the Westerlies and with limited self-steering capability, the airship deviated far from its planned course. The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace due to *force majeure*. The Chinese side will continue communicating with the US side and properly handle this unexpected situation caused by *force majeure*.”

China’s explanation runs afoul of the Chinese Communist Party’s own leaky credibility. In the mid-2010s, Beijing began expanding islets and shoals in the South China Sea, explaining that it was doing so to further peaceful scientific research in the region. [By 2017, however](#), it was clear that the artificial islands, which by then included guns, air defense, anti-ship missiles, and military grade

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Chinese military facilities on Subi Reef, a former reef in the South China Sea expanded under the guise of "scientific research".

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Why is the spy balloon here? If the balloon is part of a peaceful research program, China should have known of the clear risks of a research balloon floating all the

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misunderstandings. Instead, China was silent until the balloon was discovered by NORAD.

If the balloon is actually a tool of espionage, that's in a way even more baffling. Why would China think the spy balloon would go undetected in U.S. airspace? What advantage would surveillance gear on a balloon have over surveillance gear on the ground? Why would China threaten its ties with the U.S. by deliberately flying an intelligence gathering balloon over North America?

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The U.S. has used surveillance balloons in the past. In the 1940s, Project Mogul was an effort to send balloons with microphones into the Soviet Union, in an attempt to pick up the sounds of the country's first nuclear explosion. In the 1950s, Project Moby Dick used cameras on balloons to take pictures of sensitive nuclear sites in the USSR. The U.S. sent balloons into the Soviet Union because, as a closed society, it was the only hope it had of detecting important events.

The USSR, by comparison, did not send balloons into the U.S.; as an open society, its spies were free to travel across much of the country, and they did. Chinese spies can already get fairly good information about "sensitive sites" in the U.S. from open sources, online satellite images, and even just driving around the area and surveying them.

The U.S. government appears to be in no hurry to shoot the Chinese spy balloon down. This suggests it already understands the balloon's purpose and believes it poses no great danger to U.S. national security. Meanwhile, the spy balloon's mission has backfired: the longer the balloon remains aloft and in the global news cycle, the more embarrassment it causes China.

And that's bad news for China, which is no longer in control of the spy balloon. The U.S. government is.



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