

# Mysterious Balloons

by George Friedman - February 14, 2023

The relationship between nations is always complex and sometimes difficult to understand. Sometimes it enters the realm of the bizarre. And then, at the most extreme level, it enters the world of balloons, unidentified objects and F-22 fighters – all converging on, as they say in Washington, lies, damn lies and press briefings. This is compounded by the fact that the likely villain, China, claims that the U.S. has intruded on Chinese territory with balloons (their word) at least 10 times. This is possible but also raises the question of why Beijing permitted so many intrusions without a whisper of rage.

According to the Pentagon, China's spy balloons have entered the airspace of more than 40 nations in recent years. Given that these flying objects are somewhat visible from the ground, it is strange that no one noted them at least loudly enough to be noticed. The question is what the Chinese were looking for – and the Americans too, if Beijing's counteraccusations are correct. Both countries have many spy satellites, conceived of and used to map out the locations of nuclear-capable aircraft and missiles and deployed in constellations that would detect an enemy launch. These satellites evolved into systems that can detect a wide variety of objects on the ground as well as some that can detect electronic signals.

The satellites certainly appear to be helpful in their primary mission: There has been no nuclear exchange. But as many commentators said, satellites cannot detect everything effectively. The U.S. government has not described everything the suspected Chinese balloons spied on, which is reasonable, but it leads me to wonder what additional objects China was looking for and why slow-moving high-altitude systems were needed. Obviously, they were not tasked with detecting a range of objects in real time. To provide broad coverage, large numbers of these objects – they ought to be called objects rather than balloons, since they are at least partially steered – would have to blanket the sky, remaining relatively immobile (and utterly defenseless), broadcasting data to their home base, and therefore visually and electronically detectable.

They could have been taking a closer look at objects on the ground detected by satellites. Their targets would have to be static for an extended time, since the craft are slow moving. In addition, they would have to be outdoors. Most such things are better surveyed by humans in cars or, better yet, riding bicycles and changing a tire at a strategic place.

The problem I have is imagining the mission these objects could carry out, one that would be invisible, allow loitering if needed and be able to avoid detection. There could be some highly specialized targets, but the fleet that the Chinese appear to have, and that they claim the U.S. has, seems excessive to the task. One Chinese craft was over a U.S. Air Force base that is doubtless loaded with secrets, but how many of the secrets would be visible or broadcasting in the clear?

One theoretical mission would be to divert attention. Russia is much closer to Alaska than is China. It is engaged in a war where the United States has a role, to understate it. Having large, weird craft flying over the continental United States could, in this thinking, generate panic, with the public demanding that the government focus on national defense and not Ukraine. There are a hundred diversionary functions these objects could serve for a limited time, although the result of this episode is low panic and high confusion.

The fundamental question is how objects this large, at altitudes allowing enhanced visibility, could go unnoticed if U.S. and Chinese charges are even close to true. From available information, the craft move with the grace of an elephant and could be shot down by aircraft, missile or a well-aimed slingshot. They must be stunningly advanced, which would explain why the U.S. government is withholding answers. If national security requires it, then it should be. But the price is that the U.S. government is shooting down aircraft and, knowing from the beginning that they are Chinese, is unable to tell us what it found in the wreckage.

I don't believe these questions can be answered by assuming the relevant actors are stupid or treasonous. The objects need explaining and thus far are incomprehensible. Those favoring explanations based on stupidity or treason are welcome to. I prefer to think I am simply not capable of understanding the complex truth.

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