

The US-China Spy Balloon Crisis was Over-inflated with Drama—and We Loved It!

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The diplomatic crisis between the US (and to a lesser extent, Canada) and China, sparked by the flight of a number of unidentified flying objects over North America, is over.

At the end of January, the US spotted a 60-metre-tall object flying over Alaska, which it identified as a surveillance balloon. China admitted to have launched it, but claimed it to be an aircraft intended for weather research. The alarms went off in Washington, DC.

The US military and intelligence services reaffirmed their claims that the balloon was a surveillance device, but that it did not pose a significant security threat to US national security. It did pose, however, a reasonable threat to civilian flights. Still, the object was allowed to fly over Alaska, Canada, and the continental United States —ironically, due to concerns over possible risks resulting from the fall of debris over populated areas if the object was to be taken down. Until a fighter jet finally took it out of the skies, just off the US eastern seaboard.

In the following days, however, concerns over the risks to civilians seemed to lessen when another three objects appeared in the skies of Alaska and Western Canada. By now, the North American Aerospace Defense Command was monitoring “high altitude airborne objects” more closely. And this time, when one of these aircrafts did unlawfully enter Canadian airspace, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau authorized a US fighter to bring it down. Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, when three other similar objects were spotted, they were swiftly taken down. It did not matter whether they were small balloons belonging to a club of amateur balloonists from Illinois. Anything that did *not* resemble an airplane was going down.

The “Northern Illinois Bottlecap Balloon Brigade (NIBBB) is not pointing fingers yet”. Yet, balloon aficionados are concerned that US government officials are overreacting to their hobby. “The spy balloon had to be shot down” said Tom Medlin, from the Tennessee-based Amateur Radio Roundtable podcast. “That’s a national security threat, for sure. Then what happened is, I

think, the government got a little anxious. Maybe the word is *trigger-happy*. I don't know. When they shot them down, they didn't know what they were. That's a little concerning."

That is not to say that the spy balloons were not a concern. In the end, the violation of US sovereignty by flying, unmanned aircrafts which had purportedly drifted off, did push US-Chinese relations to a breaking point. The incident was serious enough for US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel a trip to China. "The Secretary says he does plan to reschedule this trip when the conditions are right. But, you know, [...] that could really take a long time," said Michele Kelemen, diplomacy correspondent for NPR.

Early assessments by nearly all US politicians, diplomats, and political commentators led the US public to believe that the flight of these objects over US and Canadian territories was a deliberate attempt from China to spy on US military sites and other critical infrastructure. House Speaker, Kevin McCarthy, stated that China had shown a "brazen disregard for U.S. sovereignty [in] a destabilizing action that must be addressed, and President Biden cannot be silent." Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, claimed that China had made "a mockery of our airspace". President Joe Biden reacted more calmly: "I mean, look, it's totally [...] a violation of international law. It's our airspace'. [Yet,] "It's not a major breach".

The furor created by these objects was probably more significant than any information they might have collected. Indeed, "The Pentagon's best assessment at the moment is that the balloon's surveillance capabilities are not a significant step up from what China is likely able to collect through other means like satellites in low Earth orbit".

So, the drama that unfolded in the skies over Canada and the United States in the past weeks was bigger than it should have been. And it is part of a larger trend in geopolitics, which North Americans might have failed to acknowledge —until now. That is, the centre of global power has shifted from the European-North Atlantic area, to Asia-Pacific. And, telling by the outcome, it is clear that this is not a change which the US, at least, intended or sought. Or a change that Canada is ready to face on its own.

In the end, it was too much ado about nothing. The Chinese authorities maintain that it was a research balloon that drifted far off course. Wang Yi, Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (i.e. China's most senior diplomat) described the shooting down of their balloon as "absurd and hysterical" and asked his US counterparts: "There are many balloons in the sky. Do you want to down each and every one of them?"

For the sake of Illinois-based balloonists, let's hope they don't.