China’s Spy Balloon Case

Why in news?

The United States has accused China of flying a “spy balloon” in its airspace setting off a political row in Washington.

What is the issue?

- A spy balloon was seen floating over sensitive areas of Montana in the US which led to accusations against China by the United States.
- Beijing has responded, calling the object a **civilian airship** used for meteorological research.
- Within hours of the news of the first balloon, the Pentagon confirmed that a second surveillance balloon is floating over the Latin American skies.
- The Chinese surveillance balloon was **shot down by the U.S. military**.
- Beijing has dismissed Washington’s accusations of surveillance and international airspace violation as an attempt to attack and smear China.
- China said that it is a force majeure (unforeseen event) as the airship deviated far from its planned course due to the Westerlies and limited self-steering capability.

What is the history of surveillance balloons?

- Spy balloon is literally a gas-filled balloon that is flying quite high in the sky and has some sophisticated cameras and imaging technology on it.
- **High-altitude balloons** have been used since 18th century for reconnaissance and other military missions dates.
- **French Revolutionary Wars** – In the late 18th century, balloons were used to provide a bird’s eye view of the battlefield and been an evidence of their use in the Battle of Fleurus in 1794.
- **From the American Civil War to World War I** - Balloons have been in use in all kinds of conflict, primary mode of big-picture reconnaissance, providing perspective on enemy.
- **Japanese military** tried to hit flammable bombs into US territory using balloons that were designed to float in jet stream air currents killing several civilians.
- **Project Genet –** It is a large-scale series of missions that flew photographic balloons over Soviet bloc territory by the U.S military.

What are the pros and cons of spy balloons?

Pros of spy balloons

- **Cheap to use** - Unlike satellites which can cost millions of dollars to create, and require sophisticated technology to launch, high-altitude balloons are cheap and easy to launch and control.
- **Quality images at lower heights** - Satellites move at higher altitudes and incredible speeds but spy balloons will hover around at lower heights, thus providing better quality images.

Cons of spy balloons

- **Time** - It takes more time to gather intelligence in a particular area unlike satellites that are aimed at perfect time and space.
- **Altitude changes** - While balloons cannot directly be steered they can be roughly guided to a target area by changing altitudes to catch different wind currents.

What is the impact on China-U.S ties?

- **Relationship getting worser** – The relationship have been tense in recent times with issues ranging from Taiwan and the South China Sea, to human rights in China's western Xinjiang region.
- The detection of the balloon over Montana sparked a diplomatic crisis, leading to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling off a highly anticipated visit to China.
- China also slammed the move to shoot it down as an overreaction.
- Now it is getting even worse as the security of the nation is questioned.
- Balloons were also spotted over Japan in 2020 and 2021, and over India's Andaman Islands last year.
- New Delhi and Tokyo may now be prompted to reassess how they handle such intrusions in the future.

References

1. The Indian Express | What is a spy balloon?
2. The Indian Express | About the Chinese spy balloon floating over the US
3. The Hindu | On China-U.S. 'spy balloon' row

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering