**Not-So-Beautiful Balloons: US Needs Quick Answers**

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That fetching song of yesterday, “Up, Up and Away in My Beautiful Balloon,” needs to be modified. Today it could be my not-so-beautiful balloons. With four balloons or objects taken down, the United States needs one more to become a national balloon ace, the first since World War I ace pilot and zeppelin killer Frank Luke.

Satire and cynicism may not be the most appropriate reaction to the events of the past two weeks. But given that China apparently has had this huge balloon-centric intelligence-gathering program in place for at least several years and the hundreds of billions of dollars the United States has spent on collecting intelligence, how and why was the intelligence community caught off-guard and seemingly unaware or surprised? Obviously, an investigation is needed with at least preliminary results announced in days and certainly not weeks or months.

Many hypotheses and wild guesses about the extent and aims of the Chinese balloon reconnaissance are emerging. The most compelling explanation in my judgment is this one: China has exploited high-altitude balloons for several reasons. First, this may reflect deficiencies in China’s current satellite technologies for high-resolution and intrusive spying. Second, balloons are far less expensive than launching space satellites and can be reusable. Third, balloons are difficult to detect. Fourth, balloons allow the Chinese to probe how far this surveillance can intrude without necessarily provoking a crisis.

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That this spying may have been ongoing for some time confirms part of this thesis. However, as with all such hypotheses, only facts and objective findings can confirm or deny accuracy and validity. Whether the debris collected from each of these vehicles can provide answers, especially from Arctic conditions in Canada and Alaska, remain to be seen. And it is unclear if the White House will be able to learn much from China if indeed real two-way communications can be established.

History offers interesting insights. The use of balloons goes back to France three centuries ago. Balloons were used extensively in the Civil War and World War I. Germany’s heavier version of blimps and zeppelins bombed London. In World War II, convoys protected by U.S. Navy blimps suffered no losses to Nazi U-boats.

Weather balloons are ubiquitous. The U.S. Weather Service launches about 60,000 a year; NASA about 1,500 up to altitudes above 100,000 feet. Tethered balloons served in Afghanistan for surveillance, detection and command, control and communications. The Navy has investigated lighter-than-air vehicles for decades. Blimps are also surprisingly airworthy and less costly.

But why are even casual observers of these events bewildered and in disbelief as to how this and probably earlier administrations had been oblivious to or ignorant of China’s lighter-than-air programs? After all, the Chinese have gone to great lengths to lay out their national security and defence aims and aspirations. In 1999, two Chinese People’s Liberation Army colonels wrote Unrestricted Warfare which was a blueprint for the modernization of China’s military.

The book was of particular interest. As one of the authors of “shock and awe,” which was first published nearly a decade and a half earlier, I see Unrestricted Warfare as pure plagiarism. That came as no surprise as China had published a million copies of Shock and Awe without any respect for copyright laws. However, the two colonels referred to “lower space” operations. And since then Chinese military writers have commented on the need to exploit that part of the atmosphere where balloons can operate.

What must be done? First, preferably discreetly, the administration must take these events up with the Chinese government. Whether or not President Xi Jinping was aware of this program, almost certainly, he would not have authorized this mission. Thus, responsibility probably rests in the ministry of defence and the overseeing Politburo member. That, too, is important to determine.

Second, forensics must identify the identities of whoever launched the three “objects,” hopefully beyond a reasonable doubt. Third, an update to the nation is needed now and hopefully by the week’s end. Fourth, a review of the intelligence community must be undertaken immediately to determine if other major programs of potential adversaries may have been missed.

If there were a failure, is it institutional, a lack of imagination, bureaucratic inertia, or some other cause? The nation needs to know and needs to know now.

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