[**Strange objects in the sky**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1737188/strange-objects-in-the-sky)

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IT all began with the Chinese spy balloon. After allowing it to fly for several days over US territory, the American military finally shot down over the country’s territorial waters what it said was a surveillance device. Undoubtedly egged on by Republican furore, the White House has come to take a hard line. Almost around the same time as the balloon (whose progress was being livestreamed on YouTube) was shot down, the US also cancelled Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s scheduled trip to China.

In addition, the United States announced that balloons of a similar type had been seen flying over India, Taiwan, Japan and some other places. They are, the US State Department now says, part of a new ‘campaign’ of spy balloons being released by China. For its part, Beijing maintains that the object was a ‘weather balloon’, and that US balloons entered Chinese airspace 10 times last year, which the US denies.

All of the above could simply be grandstanding between a superpower and a superpower wannabe were it not for what has happened in American and Canadian airspace of late. Since last Friday, at least three more ‘unidentified flying objects’ have been detected over North American airspace. The first was initially seen flying along the coast of Alaska. US F-22 fighter aircraft were scrambled to pursue it and shoot it down near the Arctic. This object was said to be silver-grey in colour and about the size of a small car. According to reports, the object did not appear to be propelled by a motor or any other device but was ‘floating’ in the atmosphere.

Then on Saturday, another object, smaller than but similar in shape to the Chinese spy balloon, was shot down over Canada’s Yukon territory by US fighter aircraft after the approval of the Canadian prime minister. On Sunday, another object was detected over the Great Lakes region and shot down over Lake Huron in Michigan. This object was reportedly hexagonal in shape. The US has not blamed China directly for the three ‘objects’, but given that they appeared so soon following the Chinese spy balloon (confirmed by Beijing) the implication is that these may all be a part of the same campaign to collect sensitive data about the United States and its military installations. Beyond obtaining surveillance information, the objects, if at all they are Chinese, could also be decoys meant to gauge just how long any intruding craft would have before being shot down by US fighter jets.

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In the case of the Chinese spy balloon, the delay in shooting it down was chalked up to the fact that it was flying over populated areas and any US missile used to shoot it down would have a wide debris field, causing human casualties and property damage on the ground. Of the three objects shot down lately, nearly all appeared to be flying higher than the usual altitude. The ones flying over Alaska and the Yukon were considered “a danger to civilian aircraft” and therefore a priority for elimination.

All controversies have a political dimension. In the case of the United States, the virulently anti-China stance of the Trump/ Make America Great Again adherents means that there is little room to take Chinese intrusions (or even alleged Chinese intrusions) lightly. This could be the reason why the Democratic-controlled White House has decided to adopt a very hard line towards any ‘unspecified flying objects’. This is in addition to the fact that Americans have a very peculiar territorial psychology. Unlike the rest of the world, which has to contend with several neighbours that may be friendly or hostile, the US has oceans on its east, west and part of its south and land borders with just two countries. This means that when any sort of object known to belong to a foreign country intrudes actual American airspace, the reaction of shock is greater than that which would be generated in other parts of the world.

It is not the first time ‘unspecified flying objects’ have been observed over the United States. At the end of last year, the Pentagon finally came out and told everyone that such objects have been seen over American airspace or by military aircraft numerous times over the past several decades. Most have no explanation and have varying descriptions and are perhaps not unlike the ones seen recently. It does not appear that the US has chosen to shoot them down in all cases, making the recent reaction one that signifies a new zero tolerance stance that was not seen before.

There are of course kooky theories about what these unidentified flying objects are. America has always had groups that believe in aliens and alien spacecraft. Naturally, online forums devo­ted to this topic are overflowing with theories. Many posit that it is new and more sensitive technology that has enabled better detection, and now that we have achieved this level of technological sophistication, it will allow humans to come in contact with life on other planets. After all, if humans can send rovers to Mars, perhaps it is not out of the question that other living creatures could send exploratory missions to Earth. Adherents of shows like Ancient Aliens claim that humans, the ancient Egyptians for instance, did have contact with non-human beings, which allowed them to build stunning structures like the pyramids.

The truth of the matter, at least about the UFOs shot down over the weekend, is that no one knows. While it is possible that the US government has some idea, it appears unlikely that it would allow conjecture if it could lay the issue to rest for a very curious and transfixed American population. They, and everyone else in the world, expected 2023 to be an extraordinary year, but contact with aliens was likely not on anyone’s list of predictions.

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