

## PUNCTURING TIES: On China-U.S. 'Spy Balloon' Row

The Hindu

Paper - II  
(International Relation)

The shooting down of a Chinese surveillance balloon by the U.S. military has served as a stark reminder of the deep distrust that characterises relations between the world's two biggest powers. The detection of the balloon last week over Montana sparked a diplomatic crisis, leading to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling off a highly anticipated visit to China from February 6.

### There was an effort to ease mutual relations

The visit, which would have been the first by a top U.S. diplomat since 2018, was the result of a months-long effort to halt the downward spiral in ties, coming out of the Biden-Xi meet in November at the G-20 Bali summit. The fragility of that effort has been laid bare by the controversy over the balloon, which has punctured the process of restoring stability in relations that have been marred by growing discord.

### What does China have to say?

Beijing has maintained that the balloon was "civilian" (meteorology), but had drifted off-course. It also slammed the move to shoot it down as an overreaction. The U.S. has seen the deployment of what it called a surveillance balloon, on the eve of the Blinken visit, deep into its airspace as a grave provocation — one, it pointed out, that Beijing too would not have tolerated.

CHINA

### US shoots down Chinese balloon

A US fighter jet has **shot down a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon** that has been drifting across American airspace for days. **Beijing has condemned the move.**



The balloon was shot down by an F-22 fighter jet off the coast of South Carolina on February 4.



## This has happened before

U.S. officials have acknowledged this was by no means the first such surveillance balloon spotted over American skies; there was a similar incident under the Trump administration. Balloons were also spotted over Japan in 2020 and 2021, and over India's Andaman Islands last year. All three governments did not take steps to shoot down the balloons, presumably coming to the conclusion that the balloons, in the age of intelligence powered by advanced satellites, were not important enough to warrant being shot down.

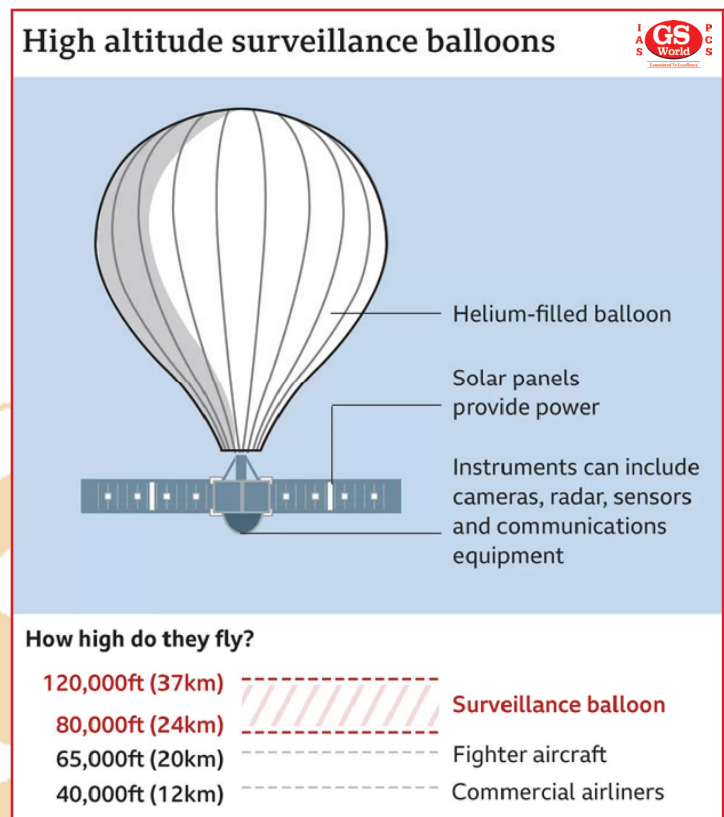
## India and Japan need re-evaluation

New Delhi and Tokyo may now be prompted to reassess how they handle such intrusions in the future. Beijing, for its part, would do well to reconsider the benefits and costs of what appears to be a new, and provocative, tool for intelligence-gathering.

## Rift in relations between America and China

It is conceivable that the Biden administration may have allowed the balloon to quietly drift away had it not been spotted in Montana. The Biden administration faced intense criticism at home for not shooting down the balloon earlier. Its response, including cancelling the Blinken visit, reflects how China has become a hot-button issue in U.S. politics. This development has constrained how a key relationship is managed.

In 2001, the U.S. and China were able to dial down tensions after a collision between a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet over Hainan island in China. Should a similar crisis now arise, particularly against the charged backdrop of an intensifying rivalry, muscle-flexing over Taiwan, and a heated domestic discourse, finding an off-ramp will be far more difficult.



### **Who and how much authority over the air and water area?**

International law is clear about entry into air and water. Each country has complete sovereignty and control over its waters extending up to 12 nautical miles (about 22 km) from its land area. Each country regulates any interference with its airspace, which includes both commercial and government aircraft.

### **The upper limit of airspace is unclear in international law.**

The upper limit of sovereign airspace is unclear in international law. This is generally considered to be the maximum altitude at which commercial and military aircraft operate, which is about 45,000 feet (about 13.7 km). However, the supersonic Concorde jets operate at 60,000 ft (over 18 km). While the Chinese balloon was also reported flying at an altitude of 60,000 feet.

### **The legal framework of the airspace decided at the Chicago Convention**

- The 1944 Chicago Conference on International Civil Aviation laid out a detailed framework for the international legal framework that allows entry into a country's airspace. International law does not interpret the altitude of 60,000 feet at which satellites operate, traditionally seen as falling within the purview of space law. It has set an additional layer of rules on the use of military equipment, but it does not regulate military activities.
- During the Cold War era, America prepared its "Air Defense Identification Zone". It requires all aircraft entering US airspace to identify themselves. Canada has also delineated its airspace. Several other countries have also created air defense identification zones, including China, Japan, and Taiwan. Under this, Taiwan regularly repels Chinese aircraft by fighter jets in response to unauthorized incursions into its airspace.
- The Outer Space Treaty, signed in 1967, allows member states to use outer space for peaceful purposes. Also, this treaty bans the deployment of such weapons in space, which are mass killers. It should be noted that India is a part of this treaty from the beginning.

### **What is a spy balloon?**

High altitude balloons are similar to weather balloons deployed around the world to monitor changes in the local weather of an area. However, when it comes to spy balloons, their purpose has changed. These balloons are capable of flying 24,000-37,000 meters above the ground. The altitude at which these balloons fly is well above that at which commercial air traffic flies. Airplanes almost never fly above 40,000 feet. Fighter aircraft typically do not operate above 65,000 feet, although spy planes such as the U-2 have a service ceiling of 80,000 feet or more.

### **Balloons have a long military history**

- The image of hot air balloons is generally used as a symbol of peace. But balloons also have a long military history, stretching back to the Napoleonic era in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when they were used for surveillance and bombing missions. With changing times, the modern military importance of balloons has diminished. Now is the era of unmanned aerial vehicles and drones. Such military equipment has proven effective in the Ukraine war.
- Balloons may have little combat capability, but they retain a unique ability to conduct surveillance because they fly at higher altitudes than aircraft, according to experts in international law. Balloons can remain stationary over sensitive areas, making them difficult to detect with radar.
- France used crewed balloons for surveillance in the Franco-Austrian war in 1859. Crewed and tethered balloons were again used shortly after during the US Civil War, which stretched from 1861 to 1865.
- Surveillance balloons became more common in World War I and II. During the latter war, the Japanese military used balloons to loft incendiary bombs into US territory.
- Just after World War II, the US military started exploring the use of high-altitude spy balloons, which led to a large-scale series of missions called Project Genetrix.



### Expected Question

**Que. With reference to the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, consider the following statements-**

1. This treaty allows member states to use outer space for peaceful purposes.
2. This treaty prohibits the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in space.
3. India is a part of this treaty since its inception

Which of the above statement (s) is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) 1, 2, and 3

**Answer : D**

### Mains Expected Question & Format

**Que.: International civil aviation laws provide all countries complete and exclusive sovereignty over the airspace above their territory. What do you understand by 'airspace'? What are the implications of these laws on the space above this airspace? Discuss the challenges which this poses and suggest ways to contain the threat.**

**Answer Format :**

- ❖ Define Airpace.
- ❖ Write about International civil aviation laws.
- ❖ Implications of these laws on the space.
- ❖ Challenges related to it and suggest measures to control it.
- ❖ Give a balanced conclusion.

**Note:** - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.