

Spy Balloons and Grey-Zone Warfare Tactics

written by iasexam.com | 14/02/2023



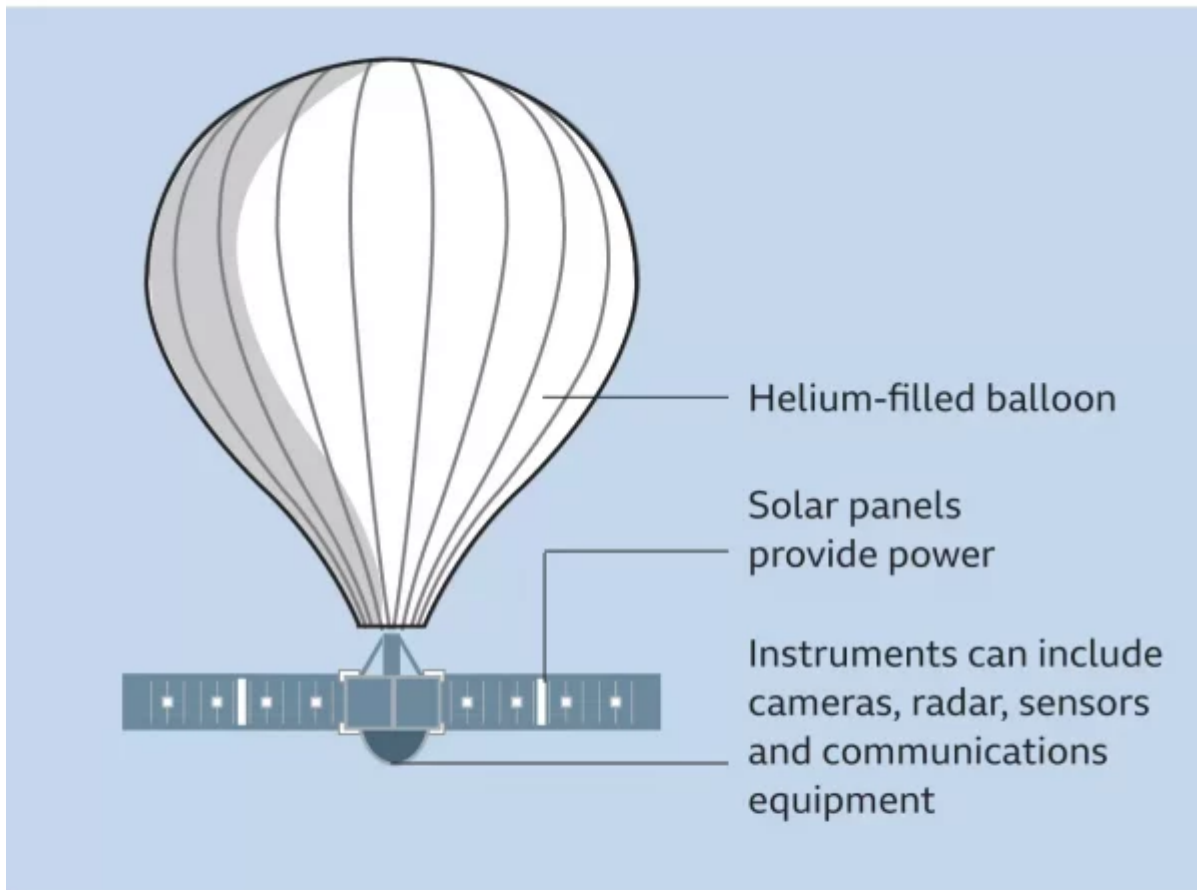
Context - The recent incidence of Chinese ‘Spy Balloon’ sighted at 60,000 ft over the skies of Montana in the United States which was finally shot down by a missile from a US F22 Fighter jet off the coast of South Carolina has left far too many questions.

While some of the clues emerging from the balloon’s debris have unraveled some information, the incident itself is reminiscent of Cold War era tactics and is a pointer towards archetypical grey-zone activities which could characterize China’s standard operating procedure in the future.

What are Spy Balloons?

- Spy Balloons are cheap, quiet and hard-to-reach balloons that have been used for reconnaissance purposes, including in conflicts like the American Civil War.
- The practice became widespread during World War I and was used extensively during the Cold War when the US launched hundreds of balloons to gather intelligence on the Soviet Union and China.

High altitude surveillance balloons



How high do they fly?



Source: Reuters



What is Grey-Zone Warfare?

'Grey Zone Operations Can be broadly defined as the exploitation of operational space between peace and war to change the status quo through the use of coercive actions which remain below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military response.

Claims and Counterclaims

- The US State Department's confident claims that the balloon "was clearly for intelligence surveillance and was likely capable of collecting and geo-locating communications" point to an

incoming precipitation of crisis in US-China relations.

- China has for decades complained about US surveillance by ships and spy planes near its own territory, leading to occasional confrontations over the years. According to China, the balloon was for research but got off track.

Chinese Perceptions

- **Spy balloon episode gives us a peek into the worldview of chinese strategists** - There is a strategic awareness in Beijing that even as the war has raged on in Europe for over a year, the US may be turning its attention to the Western Pacific region where it is rebuilding its naval power, resuscitating alliances, and consolidating its position as the centre of its hub-and-spokes network in the Pacific theater.
- **US-Philippines defence cooperation** - There has been the renewal of the US-Philippines defence cooperation, which bolsters America's defenses with respect to Taiwan.
- **Japan's return to geopolitics is another basis for such perceptions within China** - Japanese PM Fumio Kishida's warning that East Asia could suffer the same fate as Ukraine has led the nation to radically alter its security policy. On one hand, Japan is building domestic capabilities like incrementally increasing spending on defence, and planning for a missile arsenal to deter China, it is also expanding defence cooperation with the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
- **Chinese apprehensions about the Indo pacific concept** - Chinese strategists have red-flagged the Indo-Pacific concept, likening America's approach of developing ties with China's neighbors with an aim of creating regional blocs like NATO to contain China.

Chinese Expansion Grey-Zone Warfare Tactics

- **Reclaiming reefs in south China sea** - The first step in its expansion into the South China Sea was reclaiming reefs and then building military infrastructure there.
- **Villages near Indian border** - Similarly, China has constructed 'xiaokang' villages near the Indian border in a bid to bolster its territorial claims.
- **Spy balloon episode is one of the grey zone tactics** - The spy balloon episode marks a major inflection point in this approach, since the US, for the first time, has been at the receiving end of China's grey-zone tactics.

Conclusion

The United States uses a variety of tools, from satellites to intercepted communications to surveil China. It's not unreasonable that China would attempt to do the same to the United States. In between these two views is the realization that the dragon's hidden grey-zone tactics have reached the continental US more brazenly than ever before.