

3. Spy Balloon: Another Grey-zone warfare tactics

Prelims Syllabus: International Relations

Mains Syllabus: GS-II International Relations | Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings and agreements involving India



Why in News?

- The recent incident of a Chinese ‘spy balloon’ sighted 60,000 feet over the skies of Montana in the United States (US) 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 unanswered.

What the debris indicates?

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

US claims:

- 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.

Understanding 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 theatre.

- **US-Philippines defence cooperation:** There has been the renewal of the US-Philippines defence cooperation, which bolsters America's defences 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 Indo pacific concept:** Chinese strategists have re-flagged the Indo-Pacific concept, likening America's approach of developing ties with China's neighbours with an aim of creating regional blocs like NATO to contain China.

Japan's new military posturing is being viewed with trepidation in Beijing:

- First, it is believed that Japan will deploy missiles in bases closer to Taiwan.
- Second, there is a belief that Japan's increasing defence capabilities in the region combined with America's growing military power in the Western Pacific may exceed China's comprehensive national power eventually.
- **Grey-zone warfare:** A key feature of China's aggression and expansionism
- **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 realisation that the dragon's hidden grey-zone tactics have reached the continental US more brazenly than ever before.