

Protocols to tackle threat of spy balloons

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Why in News?

- The Indian military has drafted a set of basic protocols to tackle newer threats like surveillance balloons or other unidentified objects in the sky.

- This was after a similar entity was spotted a year ago over the strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

What are spy balloons?

- A contemporary spy balloon is a piece of spying equipment, for example a camera, suspended beneath a balloon that floats above a given area, carried by wind currents.
 - The equipment attached to the balloons may include radar and be solar powered.
- Balloons are one of the oldest forms of surveillance technology. The Japanese military used them to launch incendiary bombs in the US during World War Two.
- They were also widely used by the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.
- Modern balloons typically hover between 24km-37km above the earth's surface (80,000ft-120,000ft).

Image caption: Surveillance Balloons

Why use spy balloons rather than satellites?

- For the last few decades, satellites were used on a regular basis. But now lasers or kinetic weapons are being invented to target satellites.
- Hence, there is a resurgence of interest in balloons.
- Although, these balloons don't offer the same level of persistent surveillance as satellites, but are easier to retrieve, and much cheaper to launch.
- Balloons can also scan more territory from a lower altitude and spend more time over a given area because they move more slowly than satellites.

News Summary: Protocols to tackle threat of spy balloons

Why Indian Military is keen on formulating protocols to tackle threat of spy balloons?

- **Increasing cases of spy balloons**
 - In February 2023, the United States shot down a giant Chinese balloon, which it accused of spying on its crucial military sites.
 - China denied the allegations and said it was a civilian aircraft meant to research weather-related aspects.
 - Days later, the US shot down a cylindrical-shaped object over Canada and another unidentified aerial object in its own airspace.
- **Aerial object was spotted over the Andamans**

- Last year, an aerial object was spotted over the Andamans, even though its origin could not be ascertained at that time.
- As per media reports, the object had drifted away over the ocean before military authorities could take a decision on action to be taken.

What are the key highlights of draft protocols to tackle newer threats like surveillance balloons?

- **Detail the sequence of action**

- The protocols detail the sequence of action in case an unidentified slow-moving aerial object is spotted.
- This includes detection, positive identification, verification and targeting using a suitable platform and weapon system.
- These steps will be followed by detailed photography of the target, a comprehensive report on it and analysis of remnants, if recovered.

- **Process to be photographed**

- The entire operation from the launch of the weapon system to destroying the target will be photographed and recorded in detail.

- **A detailed report will be prepared**

- A detailed report will be prepared including the sighting time, size of target, its description recorded on the radars on ground and this will be intimated through the chain of command.

What are the associated challenges?

- The primary challenge in such a sighting is the detection and identification of the object. The satellites or radars cannot detect balloons as they are slow-moving.
 - In India, several radars at key military sites are being upgraded to detect such aerial objects.
- Even the US, which possesses the most sophisticated military equipment, had earlier failed to detect the slow-moving Chinese balloons.

What is the significance of Andaman & Nicobar for India?

- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands house the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar military command.
- What makes these islands strategically important is their proximity to the Indo-Pacific as well as to major choke-points or sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Bay of Bengal — the Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait and the Ombai-Wetar straits.
 - Most of the world's shipping trade passes through these choke-points.

- And, the islands offer India the potential to play a critical role towards enhancing its influence in the Indian Ocean region and support its military operations in the area.
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Q1) What is surveillance?

Surveillance is the close monitoring of a person's behavior or activities to gather information about them which can be used to influence or manage decision making. In the context of espionage, surveillance comes in many different forms.

Q2) What is Malacca Strait?

The Malacca Strait is a narrow stretch of water that lies between the Malay Peninsula (Peninsular Malaysia) and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. It connects the Andaman Sea to the west with the South China Sea to the east. The Strait is an important shipping lane, with more than 100,000 vessels passing through it each year, making it one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

Source: [Govt putting in place protocols to tackle threat of spy balloons after Andamans incident](#) | [BBC](#) | [Times of Indi](#)

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