

Chinese Spy Balloon Over Latin America Elicits Minimal Response

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In February 2023, a Chinese surveillance balloon that traversed North American airspace captured the attention of policymakers and civil society in the United States and Canada for more than a week. In contrast, a similar balloon floating simultaneously over Latin America hardly garnered attention.¹ According to Spanish-language *CNN Español*, around the same time, a Chinese balloon passed over Costa Rica and Venezuela, ultimately hovering over Colombia's northern region for some time. Regional coverage of the balloon over Latin America generally refers to the "balloon" without mentioning its capacity to conduct surveillance operations. According to reports in one of Colombia's most important news dailies, *El Tiempo*, the Colombian air force discussed options to defend its airspace. In the end, how-



A Chinese surveillance balloon hovers over the Americas.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balloon_over_MYR.jpg Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

ever, Latin American leaders opted to observe the balloon's passage rather than take action. The muted response from regional leaders is telling of their desire to remain out of the fray in an international order that they recognize is increasingly contested by China's rise. It also comes months before important planned visits to China by the presidents of Colombia and Costa Rica, both of which are seeking development assistance.

The Colombian Air Force said that the balloon did not present a threat to national security and defense and that it launched investigations to establish the origin of the object... Costa Rica also did not report threats to its national security.

Source: "Lo que sabemos sobre el globo chino que sobrevoló Colombia y Costa Rica (What we know about the Chinese balloon that flew over Colombia and Costa Rica)," *CNN Español* (Spanish-language version of the popular U.S. news outlet), 7 February 2023. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/02/07/globo-chino-colombia-costa-rica-orix/>

A spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted for the first time that a balloon seen over the skies of Latin America belongs to the country... Two Latin American countries reported that they saw a balloon transit in their skies. One of them was Colombia, whose Air Force reported that its National Air Defense System "detected an object above 55,000 feet, which entered Colombian airspace in the northern sector of the country."... The Air Force said that the balloon did not present a threat to national security and defense and that it launched investigations to establish the origin of the object... Costa Rica also did not report threats to its national security.

Source: "Globo espía chino: Colombia podría derribar objeto que entró al espacio aéreo? (Chinese spy balloon: Could Colombia shoot down an object that entered its airspace?)," *El Tiempo* (one of Colombia's most important dailies), 7 February 2023. <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/conflicto-y-narcotrafico/globo-espia-chino-colombia-podria-derribarlo-si-entro-al-espacio-aereo-739897>

Colombia is another country where an object "similar to a balloon" passed into its airspace in recent days. According to the Colombian Air Force, it will react by constant monitoring of its airspace and looking to guard its national interest... While a range of potential responses was discussed, the balloon passed from the country's airspace without representing "a threat to security and national defense" according to the Colombian Air Force.

Notes:

[1] For more information on the differences in regional coverage of the Chinese balloon over Latin America, see: Margaret Myers, "'O Globo Chino' Floats Over Latin America," Wilson Center, February 10, 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/globo-chino-floats-over-latin-america>