

Suspected Chinese spy balloon drifting over U.S. has surveillance part as big as multiple school buses

China acknowledged Friday that a high-altitude balloon spotted this week over Montana does in fact belong to Beijing, but it referred to the airship as a civilian device “used for scientific research such as meteorology.” A senior defense official told CBS News on Thursday that the Defense Department was “confident” that it was, in fact, a Chinese surveillance balloon.

The payload of the balloon — that is, the part under the balloon conducting the surveillance — is the size of two to three school buses, and the balloon itself is much larger, according to a U.S. official.

According to a statement by the Chinese foreign ministry, the airship was “affected by the westerly wind” and its ability to control its direction “is limited.” The statement also says that the balloon “seriously deviated from the scheduled route” and expressed regret that “the airship strayed into the United States due to force majeure.”

By Friday morning, the balloon was no longer over Montana but had moved over the Midwest and is now over “the middle of the country,” according to a U.S. official. A Chinese balloon has never been over the middle of the country before. The only other time a Chinese balloon has flown over the continental U.S. was during a brief overflight of Florida. There have been overflights of Hawaii and Guam. In previous instances, the Chinese have been able to recover the balloon. Although it can maneuver, it will still travel in the direction it is carried by the jet stream.

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