



**Opening Statement**  
**Senator Susan Collins**  
**SAC-D Hearing on PRC's High-Altitude Surveillance Efforts Against the United States**  
**February 9, 2023**

Mr. Chairman, let me begin by saying how much I'm looking forward to working very closely with you in my new position on this subcommittee. And I want to thank you also for holding this important hearing on the brazen incursion into America's airspace by a Chinese surveillance balloon.

Let me begin by noting the obvious: this was not a harmless weather balloon somehow blown wildly off course as the Chinese have claimed. This was a serious and blatant attempt by the Chinese to collect valuable data. In fact, a sophisticated spy balloon such as this one provides certain advantages over high-tech satellites.

A key element of the Administration's calculus was to postpone shooting down the Chinese spy balloon resting upon the goal of avoiding "undue" risk to civilians on the ground. However, it defies belief that there was not a single opportunity to safely shoot down this spy balloon prior to the coast of South Carolina. By the Administration's logic, we would allow the Chinese to fly surveillance balloons over the Pentagon or other sensitive sites near populated areas. Obviously, every Administration has an obligation to protect Americans on the ground but also to defend U.S. airspace against incursions by known foreign surveillance aircraft.

A related question involves the timeline for destroying the spy balloon. NORAD was tracking the balloon as it violated U.S. airspace over Alaska on January 28th, yet deliberations with the President to shoot down the balloon apparently did not occur until two or three days later when it approached the lower 48 states. As the Senator from Alaska would tell us all, Alaskan airspace is American airspace. Period. This balloon could have been shot down, it seems to me, over remote areas in Alaska or our territorial waters surrounding Alaska.

The best way to avoid conflict with China is for President Xi and the Chinese Communist Party to have no doubt regarding the resolve of the U.S. government to defend our territory and our interests. As the Secretary of State has said repeatedly, this incursion violated American sovereignty and international law. In my judgment, U.S. deterrence was weakened when this spy balloon was permitted to traverse Alaska and several other states, including hovering over sensitive military bases and assets.

Finally, I share the concerns that the Chairman has raised that there was not a consistent answer. There was also not good communication between the Administration and this committee.

This incident highlights the ongoing and increasingly blatant threat to the United States posed by the People's Republic of China, which is the pacing threat not just for today, but for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, our Subcommittee is responsible for making sure that the Department of Defense has the resources needed to keep America safe.

Regarding previous balloons, it's alarming that NORAD and NORTHCOM were apparently unaware of these incidents in real time. That exposes questions about whether there are unacceptable gaps in the military's ability to detect and address potential airborne threats.

I look forward to hearing the testimony today and to better understanding how the Department handled this surveillance, and how it will handle future violations of U.S. airspace.