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How Should Japan Respond to the Chinese Reconnaissance Balloons?

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Chinese balloons have taken the international community by surprise. They are being talked about in both the U.S. and Japan. The one that entered the U.S. airspace was shot down by a U.S. Air Force missile off the coast of South Carolina on the East Coast. The U.S. government determined that the balloon was on a military reconnaissance mission because it was flying over the state of Montana, where an ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) base is located. The balloon's wreckage, scattered over a 1.5 km² area on the ocean surface, has already been recovered, and a recovery effort is underway for the submerged equipment. According to the information available at the time of writing, the balloon's diameter was about 60 meters, and it was carrying equipment weighing approximately one ton. Moreover, it was equipped with propellers and rudders that allowed it to change speed and direction, and it had solar panels for a prolonged flight. It was reported that the balloon was flying at an altitude of approximately 20 km. It is, however, necessary to wait for the investigation results to ascertain the submerged equipment's functions. China has claimed that the balloon was being used for civilian weather observation, but it is still too early to determine what the truth is.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, Chinese reconnaissance balloons briefly entered U.S. airspace on three occasions during the Trump administration. Furthermore, recovery and analysis of the balloon that crashed off the coast of Hawaii last June revealed that it was also a Chinese reconnaissance balloon. Such balloons were also seen over Sendai City in June 2020 and over Hachinohe City in September 2021; however, Japan's Ministry of Defense did not seem to take any special action. When it comes to reconnaissance of enemy territory, there is the U-2 aircraft and satellites that can take photos. It is widely speculated that the downed balloon not only functioned like a reconnaissance plane or satellite but also collected signals from nuclear weapons, radars, and sonars at U.S. military bases. In other words, it served as not only an "eye" but also an "ear." If it turns out that Japan is also a target for similar reconnaissance activities, the nation should be on alert and implement countermeasures such as having the Self-Defense Forces shoot down the balloons. If the balloons are being used for military purposes, they clearly violate the nation's airspace.

Currently, there is a war going on in Ukraine. The country is involved not only in regular military warfare but also in cyberwarfare and information warfare. This is called "hybrid warfare." For

example, both Ukraine and Russia are using television and social networking sites for propaganda, including fabricated images. This propaganda warfare has had a great impact on people worldwide, helped shape international public opinion, and boosted patriotic sentiments in the two countries. Information is extremely important; those who are adept at manipulating it have an upper hand when it comes to warfare. So far, Ukraine appears to be one step ahead in this regard; it has received state-of-the-art weapons from the West, including tanks and missiles.

In August 1945, Japan unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in the Pacific War. Thus, it was occupied by the U.S. and covered by the U.S. nuclear umbrella under the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty. It therefore came to depend on the U.S. for national security, that is, defense and intelligence. Now that Japan has become a superpower both economically and militarily, it must possess its own intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities.

(This is the English translation of an article written by MASUZOE Yoichi, Political Scientist, which originally appeared on the e-Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on March 14, 2023.)