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OP-ED | China Policy Initiative

THE CHINESE SPY BALLOON ABOVE OUR COUNTRY WAS TEMPORARY, BUT THREATS TO OUR LAND ARE PERMANENT.

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The spy balloon episode shows that we cannot trust the Biden Administration to take timely and effective action to neutralize Chinese Communist Party (CCP) threats against our homeland.
- ★ CCP's acquisition of strategic American agricultural land, especially adjacent to sensitive military and infrastructure sites, is more dangerous than a temporary balloon incursion.
- ★ Preventing CCP control of U.S. agricultural land is possible through legislative action in our state capitols if the federal government fails to lead.

After a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) spy balloon passed over many parts of the U.S. unhindered, the federal government finally shot it down off the coast of South Carolina on February 4. The balloon may be gone, but the threat to our national security remains.

This incursion was certainly a test of our leaders' resolve, and the equipment on board likely sent sensitive intelligence back to Beijing while it was over U.S. land. This intelligence will probably be used for espionage or used to undermine our geostrategic position in the Pacific at a time when credible voices increasingly warn of an imminent CCP invasion of Taiwan.

The balloon may seem like a passing incident to some, but our land — our most precious commodity after our own families — is vital to our future. We count on it for food



security, revenue, and for strategic resilience in the generations to come. And a failure to protect our land from infiltration would provide a network of permanent bases for “balloon-like” intelligence gathering and espionage scattered all over our country.

Based on the Biden Administration’s track record of appeasement of China, for example, disbanding the Trump-era China Initiative meant to empower the Justice Department to combat CCP espionage, we cannot trust them to take timely and effective action to neutralize CCP threats against our homeland. The official line is that President Biden had authorized the military to shoot down the balloon days before it did so on Saturday but that the Pentagon advised against it due to potential damage to life and property on the ground from the debris field. This claim is not credible. Malmstrom Air Force Base in central Montana, one of the sensitive sites the balloon flew above, is surrounded by 13,800 square miles of open plains housing 100 ICBM silos, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) apparently tracked the balloon over sparsely populated Alaska and western Canada before that.

In some sense, we can be thankful that this balloon may help focus our attention on the CCP acquisition of strategic American land and infrastructure that is already taking place. Though the balloon represented an obvious intrusion into our airspace, the CCP’s land acquisition is a much less visible process that is well underway. In 2019, [a Chinese billionaire purchased](#) 140,000 acres of Mexican border-adjacent land in southwest Texas. This area is in the same county as Laughlin Air Force Base, a training ground for U.S. Air Force pilots. Last year, after the Fufeng Group, a Chinese agricultural company, purchased 370 acres of farmland 12 miles from Grand Forks Air Force Base, the Air Force deemed its acquisition a “significant threat.” These stories have received some traction in the press, but many other significant agricultural land acquisitions, as well as non-land purchases of agricultural technology, seeds, and livestock, continue unabated.

CCP control of U.S. agricultural land is an urgent national security concern, even if the land is not adjacent to sensitive sites. Securing and controlling world food supply chains is an integral part of China’s stated strategy to dominate us politically and economically, and this part of its plan is now playing out in real-time. Chinese investors’ holdings of U.S. agricultural land surged from [13,720 acres in 2010 to 352,140 acres in 2020](#) — a stunning 5,300% increase, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To put this into perspective, the average U.S. farm is [445 acres](#), so nearly 800 American families could be farming this acreage that is now controlled by China.

Unfortunately, the federal government is proving undependable in the protection of American agricultural land. Congress has introduced constructive bills that seek to block CCP control of U.S. agricultural land, but they have little chance of making it past the president’s desk. While the Biden Administration has taken some punitive action against China, such as enacting export controls undercutting their microchip industry and



banning products made in the brutalized Uyghur Muslim province of Xinjiang, it has shown a reluctance to take substantive actions to secure our national security that might anger the CCP.

If the Biden administration fails to act, states can still take important steps to protect American land. Preventing CCP control of U.S. agricultural land is possible through state legislative action, and several state measures have already passed constitutional muster. At least 12 states, including Arizona, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania, have already enacted laws effectively preventing the CCP from controlling agricultural land. A growing number of other states, including Montana, South Carolina, and Texas, have introduced legislation in the 2023 session.

At South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem's request, two state legislators introduced a bill that would create a review board to adjudicate security threats from foreign agricultural land purchases that slip through the cracks at the federal level. South Dakota, which is home to Ellsworth Air Force Base, has clearly recognized the risks that these land purchases present. Other states seek to ban CCP purchases across the board or ban purchases by problem countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and others, while some even propose a blanket ban on all foreign ownership. The states are called the "laboratories of democracy" for a reason. Experimentation is vital to ultimate success, and creativity is needed to solve this problem quickly.

At the heart of the conflict between the U.S. and China is the question of "reciprocity." Right now, it does not seem like China's posture toward us matches our posture toward them. The Chinese would undoubtedly shoot our spy balloons out of the sky, as they demonstrated by blasting five of our U2 spy planes out of their airspace in the middle of the last century. As soon as the balloon crossed into American airspace last week and was confirmed to be over an unpopulated area, we should have blown it out of the sky.

Reciprocity in land ownership is even more important because nations must share basic moral understandings to achieve a minimum of mutual respect required to find common ground on complex and delicate issues. Americans are not allowed to buy Chinese farmland, so we must ensure that the CCP is not able to buy American farmland either. China is our top nation-state adversary, but unfortunately, our societies and economies are interconnected. Strategic decoupling, including urgent land reform measures, is urgently required to preserve our national security.

The important difference between airborne infiltration and land infiltration is that balloons can eventually be shot out of the air. The land is forever.



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