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A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF SECURITY APPROACHES TOWARD UNEXPLAINED AERIAL PHENOMENA ACROSS THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Abstract

The number of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) reports by international military personnel has steadily increased in recent years. At the same time, many governments have openly begun investigating UAPs. Across the Indo-Pacific, many major powers have independently developed similar approaches toward dealing with individual UAP events. This perspective paper surveys several recent UAP events and explores how different Indo-Pacific countries address the potential threat posed by UAPs.

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Introduction

In 2021, the government of the United States, through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), confirmed that videos taken by naval aviators depicting Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAPs) were authentic.ⁱ These videos had been seen by millions of people worldwide since their initial leaks in 2017 and 2018.ⁱⁱ They depicted just three incidents out of 114 UAP sightings investigated by American military intelligence between 2004 and 2021. In an unclassified report,ⁱⁱⁱ the ODNI admitted that UAPs are a potential threat to national security and that the intelligence community would “monitor for evidence” that they are associated with a possible adversary. Events following the Chinese spy balloon incident of February 2023, in which the US Air Force shot down three UAPs over American and Canadian airspace,^{iv} show that this potential threat is being taken seriously.

UAPs, commonly called Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), capture the popular imagination more than other national security threats. Total UAP incidents, or at least the reporting of UAP incidents, have been increasing in recent years.^v Despite the latter and perhaps due to the former, little has been written in security journals regarding UAPs. Without speculating on their origin, this perspective paper looks at comparative approaches regarding UAPs and their relation to national security by various governments across the Indo-Pacific region. The United States government has shown remarkable transparency recently in addressing UAPs, and recent actions show that they are seen as a serious security threat and a safety threat to civil aviation. Other countries, including those adversarial toward the United States, also view UAPs as security threats and have taken similar steps to address them.

For the purposes of this paper, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena can be defined simply as that – physical flying objects that pilots or government authorities cannot positively identify as anything else, such as balloons, airplanes, unmanned aerial systems or drones, birds, plastic bags, meteorological phenomena, or any of the many other identifiable things that most initial UAP reports are later determined to be. This paper is not a historical overview and will focus only on recent events in its examples. Likewise, it will also only detail current or recently completed government-sponsored investigations. Historical official investigations, such as the US Air Force’s famous Project Blue Book of the 1950s and 1960s or the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP), which operated from 2007 through 2012, are not addressed here, nor are private civilian investigations, such as those undertaken by groups like the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). Finally, it must be noted that while the author has done his best to verify facts, any errors are his own responsibility, and any speculation is his own opinion, which does not necessarily represent the views of his employer, the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

United States and Canada

In late January 2023, a large high-altitude balloon was spotted floating in the skies near Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. It was soon determined to be of Chinese origin and was believed to be involved in signals intelligence gathering.^{vi} After drifting over the United States for several days, the balloon was shot down off the coast of South Carolina on February 4.^{vii} While this particular flying

object was easily identified, three smaller objects described as UAPs were detected above northern North America in the following weeks. A cylindrical silver object the size of a small car was spotted over Alaska on February 9. Air Force pilots determined it to be unmanned, and some reported that the UAP interfered with their aircraft's sensors.^{viii} Ostensibly because the UAP was a threat to air safety, it was shot down on February 10. It fell somewhere in American territorial waters in the Arctic Ocean but was never recovered.^{ix} On February 11, a similar object was spotted nearby over Canada's Yukon Territory.^x An American F-22 flying under the auspices of NORAD and with the permission of the Canadian government shot it down the same day.^{xi} The location of its remains was determined, but due to harsh winter conditions, there has been no recovery attempt.^{xii} On the same day, a small octagonal UAP, possibly a balloon, was spotted over Montana. It was seen again on February 12 over Wisconsin. Minnesota Air National Guard pilots shot it down over Lake Huron that afternoon.^{xiii} Any recovery is unlikely due to the lake's deep waters. These recent actions illustrate current United States policy regarding the threats posed by UAPs. Potential intelligence-gathering mechanisms, as well as threats to aerial navigation, are easily negated by a Sidewinder missile. When it comes to UAPs, the United States government seems to assume that there is a threat in individual circumstances such as these.

How widespread is the UAP threat toward the United States? In its 2021 report, the ODNI reported it had investigated 144 UAP reports between 2004 and 2021.^{xiv} In a follow-up report released in January 2023, the ODNI reported 247 more UAP incidents since 2021 and investigations into 119 sightings before 2021 which were not included in the earlier report.^{xv} Most of these 510 sightings originated within the military. Because of the sheer number of sightings, the Pentagon established a study group, the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), in July 2022. AARO is tasked with studying UAP reports and making policy suggestions based on its findings. As of March 2023, 171 UAP reports investigated by AARO remain uncharacterized, meaning the reported UAPs' origins and other details remain unknown.^{xvi}

AARO is notably forthcoming about its investigations. For example, in April 2023, AARO released video footage of a UAP shaped like a metal orb, taken from an MQ-9 Reaper drone flying somewhere over the Middle East in 2022.^{xvii} Sean Kirkpatrick, the director of AARO, commented that although its origin is a mystery, the orb is similar to other UAPs seen in that region.^{xviii} AARO continues the work of a previous group, the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force (UAPTF),^{xix} which operated under the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) and prepared the 2021 ODNI report. Previous investigations into UAPs have been colored by conspiratorial accusations from the public and dismissiveness by the government. By being upfront with AARO and its mandate, the United States government shows that it takes UAPs seriously.

Canada cooperates closely with the United States through NATO and NORAD. The February 11 incident over Yukon was shot down by an American jet under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's authority because no Canadian fighter jets were nearby.^{xx} Also in February 2023, the Canadian government announced it would begin its own official investigation into UAPs.^{xxi} Called the Sky Canada Project, this investigation will involve multiple government and civilian agencies and is expected to release its findings early in 2024.^{xxii}

Japan

Ever since the 2012-2020 government of Shinzo Abe, Japan has taken a more aggressive approach to its national security. This includes attitudes toward UAPs. In 2020, Abe's defense minister, Taro Kono, announced that his ministry was considering establishing official procedures to deal with UAPs. Referring to them as UFOs, Kono claimed that Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) had never reported seeing any UAPs, and commented that he personally did not believe they existed.^{xxiii} However, he encouraged SDF pilots to take pictures of any UAPs they might encounter and to report sightings.^{xxiv} Kono's comments were reiterated the following year by Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato, representing the administration of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.^{xxv} However, in the wake of the February 2023 events in North America and the admission that several Chinese spy balloons had flown over Japan since 2019, the Japanese government began to echo American attitudes toward immediate UAP threats.^{xxvi} Present defense minister Yasukazu Hamada announced he would like SDF assets to have permission to shoot down UAPs and foreign spy balloons based on the potential harm to civilian air traffic.^{xxvii}

China

At the same time the United States and Canada were dealing with their trio of UAPs, the Chinese government dealt with its own UAP threat. On February 12, 2023, an object was detected flying above Chinese territorial waters near the major People's Liberation Army Navy base at Jianggezhuang in Shandong Province.^{xxviii} The Chinese government did not provide much more information regarding the object other than announcing plans to shoot it down.^{xxix} It is unknown if this happened, although local fishing boats were apparently asked to assist in debris recovery.^{xxx} Less than a week later, on the afternoon of February 16, the airspace above the large city of Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province was shut down due to the presence of a UAP described by civil aviation authorities as a possible balloon.^{xxxi} Airspace was reopened and flights resumed after two hours without further official comment, but not without online speculation.^{xxxii} Regarding the February 12 incident, there is a remarkable similarity between the reaction of Chinese authorities toward the UAP and the reaction of the American and Canadian governments toward the three February 2023 UAP sightings.

Like the United States, China also has its own official UAP military investigatory body.^{xxxiii} The People's Liberation Army (PLA) refers to UAPs as "Unidentified Air Conditions." In 2019, researcher Chen Li of the PLA Air Force Early Warning Academy noted an increase in UAP activity reported by the PLA. While the PLA investigators are not as forthcoming as AARO in the United States, it has enough reports to investigate that it has turned to artificial intelligence to supplement its human resources.^{xxxiv}

Russia

In June 2022, the Russian state news agency TASS reported that the Russian Academy of Science was undertaking an investigation of historical UAP reports.^{xxxv} This was announced by Roscosmos' Director-General Dmitry Rogozin, likely in response to the 2021 ODNI report and ongoing American investigations. Not much further information has been made public. However, it seems apparent that Russia has similar attitudes toward UAP-related security threats as the United States and China. As a result of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has become worried about drone-

based attacks against government infrastructure. Indeed, one such attack allegedly happened at the Kremlin early in the morning on May 3, 2023.^{xxxvi} Anti-aircraft weapons have been placed on buildings throughout Moscow. It seems reasonable to assume that if a UAP similar to the ones seen over the United States, Canada, and China in February 2023 were seen over Russia, it would be dealt with similarly by the Russian government.

India

The government of India does not seem to have any public policy regarding UAPs, nor has it invested in any official UAP investigatory body, military or otherwise. Between August and October 2012, the Indo-Tibetan Police Force reported over a hundred sightings of “Unidentified Luminous Objects” over the Chinese side of the Tibetan border, which investigators attributed to Chinese intelligence operations.^{xxxvii} Indian Army soldiers stationed on the border in Arunachal Pradesh noted more UAPs over Tibet in 2013.^{xxxviii} Despite the apparent lack of interest on the part of the government, India has a very active civilian UFO investigation community.^{xxxix}

Australia and New Zealand

Following the 2021 ODNI report, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) announced that it would not undertake any similar investigations.^{xl} Air Marshall Mel Hupfeld, chief of the RAAF at the time, commented that he was aware of the American report only through what he had seen in the media and was unaware of any UAP reports made by RAAF pilots.^{xli} In June 2021, a RAAF spokesperson confirmed that it had no protocols in place to deal with any threats posed by UAPs.^{xlii}

New Zealand was ahead of the game regarding government transparency, with the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) releasing a treasure trove of UAP reports in 2010.^{xliii} These files consisted mainly of reports submitted by the public and military pilots to the RNZAF from 1954 through 2009. None of the reports were officially investigated by the New Zealand government, which claimed it lacked the resources to do so.^{xliv}

Conclusion

The recent increase in UAP reports and the serious attention given to them by various governments show that UAPs are a serious point of interest in security studies and deserve more attention. Those governments that take proactive approaches to addressing UAPs have remarkably similar methods in doing so. The United States, Canada, and Japan, as well as China and Russia, all have a take-no-risks attitude toward neutralizing potentially dangerous UAPs, and most have active government-sponsored research bodies to investigate them. Although the current geopolitical environment might preclude closer cooperation between some of these countries, it is clear that all of their governments see UAPs as potential threats and would like to know what they are and what their intent is. Could a unified international effort in this area be a new front toward securing global peace? As President Reagan said in front of the United Nations General Assembly in 1987, “Perhaps we need some outside universal threat to make us recognize [our] common bond.”^{xlv}

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