

United States Senate

COMMITTEES:
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
FINANCE
JUDICIARY
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

December 16, 2024

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Austin,

I write to urgently raise concerns regarding the ongoing drone sightings across the Eastern United States, which have been widely reported over the past several weeks.¹ These incidents, which seem to involve clusters of drones appearing near critical infrastructure and sensitive areas, represent a growing threat to our national security that demands immediate and serious attention.

The reports of drone activity appear to be part of a broader pattern of foreign surveillance and intelligence-gathering efforts, including the 2023 Chinese spy balloon incident² and the recent Chinese-backed Salt Typhoon hack targeting our telecommunications networks.³ These actions demonstrate a clear willingness from adversarial nations to utilize unconventional technologies to surveil, gather intelligence, and intimidate. While many of the drone reports may involve false positives, particularly with individuals mistaking mundane objects for drones, the persistence of credible sightings indicates a significant and evolving risk. The drone sightings across the East Coast should be viewed within this context as part of an ongoing, multidimensional threat to our national security.

I strongly urge the Department of Defense to take all necessary steps—up to and including military action—to ensure the protection of our airspace and the security of the American people. A clear and immediate response will not only mitigate the current threat but also send a message to any foreign power seeking to undermine the security and safety of the United States.

In addition, I request responses to the following questions by December 31, 2024, or a briefing in a classified setting if necessary:

- 1) What assessments has the Department made regarding the source and intent of these drone sightings? Are they believed to be state-sponsored, private actors, or unrelated incidents?

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/12/us/new-jersey-drone-sightings/index.html>

² <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3288543/f-22-safely-shoots-down-chinese-spy-balloon-off-south-carolina-coast/>

³ <https://www.fcc.gov/document/implications-salt-typhoon-attack-and-fcc-response>

- 2) What counter-UAS capabilities are currently deployed to address these threats, and what gaps, if any, exist in our ability to detect and neutralize drones?
- 3) How is the Department coordinating with federal, state, and local authorities to ensure a cohesive response to these incidents?
- 4) What steps is the Department taking to educate the public on distinguishing credible drone threats from false positives, and how is misinformation being addressed?

Sincerely,



United States Senator
Marsha Blackburn