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## Spy Balloons Become Part of the Afghanistan Landscape, Stirring Unease



Bryan Denton for The New York Times

In Kabul, Afghanistan, daily life unfolded under the watchful gaze of an aerial surveillance balloon tethered at a military base.

By **GRAHAM BOWLEY**  
Published: May 12, 2012

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — The traders crouched beneath the walls of an old fort, hunkered down with the sheep and goats as they talked, eyes nervously flitting up from time to time at the blimp that has become their constant overseer.

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“It is there every day except the days when it is windy and rainy,” said Suleman, 45, who goes by only one name.

“It watches us day and night,” said another trader, Mir Akbar, 18, his eyes following the balloon as its nose swiveled with the wind from east to west.

“I notice it all the time,” said Rahmat Shah, 28, a secondhand car seller, who was standing slightly aside from the other men. “I know there is a camera in it.”

The dirigible, a white 117-foot-long surveillance balloon called an aerostat by the military, and scores more like it at almost every military base in the country, have become constant features of the skies over Kabul and Kandahar, and anywhere else American troops are concentrated or interested in.

Shimmering more than 1,500 feet up in the daytime haze, or each visible as a single light blinking at night, the balloons, with infrared and color video cameras, are central players in the American military’s shift toward using technology for surveillance and intelligence.

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Mean Boys 



In recent years, they have become part of a widening network of devices — drones, camera towers at military bases and a newer network of street-level closed-circuit cameras monitoring Kabul's roads — that have allowed American and Afghan commanders to keep more eyes on more places where Americans are fighting.

The dirigibles are now such a common feature in daily Afghan life that some people here shrug and say they hardly notice them. Other parts of the network have become lasting parts of the urban landscape as well, particularly in Kabul, where long-necked closed-circuit cameras overlook locations susceptible to attacks, like the Supreme Court building, traffic circles and main highways past the military camps.

But other Afghans describe a growing sense of oppression, the feeling that even as the Americans are starting to pack up to leave, the foreigners' eyes will always be on them.

It is often expressed in typically Afghan fashion, as a grumbled undercurrent of quips and brooding pronouncements: "It is an American kite," or "Afghans and Americans are up there." (They are not; there is no one in the balloons.) "It shows us that, sure, the Americans are still here," and, "It is not effective because there are still these suicide attacks and car bombs."

For others, the cameras are an outrageous intrusion into private lives, putting women and children on display for foreigners whom they see as immoral.

"We cannot sleep on our rooftops anymore," said Mohammadullah, who goes by one name, a resident of Asadabad, the capital of Kunar Province, where families regularly sleep on their roofs during the summer's sweltering heat, and who was voicing a common concern. "Whenever our female family members walk in the yard during the day, or whenever we want to say 'hi' to our wife when we sleep on rooftops, we feel someone is watching us."

First used in Iraq in 2004, the helium balloons were introduced to Afghanistan in 2007, and the military has been shipping them here ever since.

American commanders love them, for giving them a perpetual full-color view of important thoroughfares and helping to catch insurgents planting roadside bombs. They cost less than the multimillion-dollar drones that get headlines.

"It has been a game changer," said Ray Gutierrez, who trains the civilian crews, all Americans, who operate the cameras, and the military units who use them. One recent afternoon, he stood in the small control room beneath the old fort where two men with joysticks scanned close-up views of the hillsides several miles away, practically as if they could reach out and touch them. "It lets us see the battlefield as we have never been able to see it before."

For the Taliban, the blimps have become things to fear.

1 | **2** | [NEXT PAGE »](#)

*Matthew Rosenberg and Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar, Afghanistan, and Afghan employees of The New York Times from Kunar, Nangarhar, Kunduz and Helmand Provinces.*

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There's been one in the Keys for the last 32 years.

Notice, there is no more cocaine, pot or Cuban rafters.

One broke loose one time and some maroon in a 45' commercial boat tied the tether off to his boat and was lifted into the air, until the cleat let go.

May 12, 2012 at 7:40 p.m. RECOMMENDED 3



**Monterey Bill** Monterey, California

The aerostats described in Afganstan are NOT dirigibles (pronounced DIRigible). A dirigible is self-propelled and steerable, hence the term (from the Latin via French).The mispronunciation diRIGible gives the false impression that it has something to do with rigid. Moored aerostats for observation were used as far back and the American Civil War.

May 12, 2012 at 7:39 p.m. RECOMMENDED 2



**Rev Dr Randolph Becker** Key West, Conch Republic

One of those flies over the Florida Keys almost all the time - Fat Albert - can't see it from mv house. thank goodness. because then it would mean it could see

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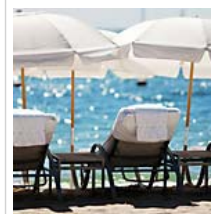
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