



The West has a massive China spy problem

September 26, 2023 **David Wilezol** *The Hill*

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A bevy of headlines in just the last few weeks concerning Chinese spying should force the West to bolster its China-focused counterintelligence efforts.

On Sept. 10, the Sunday Times reported that MI5, Britain's domestic security agency, had arrested a researcher working for the UK House of Commons' China Research Group on suspicions of being a Chinese spy. The 28-year old man, reportedly named Chris Cash, would have had access to many members of the British parliament.

While the success of whatever activities he is alleged to have undertaken is unknown, one Whitehall source speculated, "I'm pretty sure he [the researcher] turned some backbenchers from China hawks into being apathetic about Beijing."

That wasn't the only news out of the UK. The Times also reported on Sept. 12 that MI5 warned the Conservative Party in 2021 that two potential candidates for Parliament could be agents of China's United Front Work Department (UFWD) — its chief agency for overseas foreign influence and propaganda efforts.

Closer to home, National Review's Jimmy Quinn reported on Sept. 10 that aides to New York City Mayor Eric Adams had traveled to China with one of the defendants in the Justice Department's case against Chinese nationals accused of operating an illegal, government-run police station in New York City. The news has echoes of previous Chinese operations in the U.S., which positioned agents close to Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.). And in August, the Department of Justice arrested two Navy sailors for allegedly passing classified information to China on U.S. naval activities, ship designs and weaponry.

Meanwhile, the Canadian government announced on Sept. 7 the opening of an inquiry into Russian and Chinese meddling in national elections. Earlier this year, The Global and Mail cited Canadian intelligence reports indicating that Chinese intelligence ran an influence operation designed to keep Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party in power and defeat Conservative legislators considered hostile to Beijing's interests. Chinese efforts included undisclosed political contributions and forcing Chinese students to volunteer on campaigns. This scheme resembles successful Chinese efforts to infiltrate and influence the Australian parliament in the last several years.

This kind of penetration of Western institutions is downright subtle compared to the news out of India. Various Indian press outlets have reported on a diplomatic standoff between Chinese officials and employees at the Taj Palace in Delhi, the host city for last week's G20 summit.

According to the Times of India, a Chinese delegation refused to submit 20 bags of "suspicious equipment" to a security screening, resulting in a 12-hour dispute with hotel security staff. The hotel served as the Brazilian president's lodging, and was also very close to the ITC Maurya hotel, where President Biden was staying. Ultimately the Chinese agreed to take their gear back to the Chinese embassy in India.

Clearly, China is undaunted in its boldness to run operations against targets in the West and elsewhere. As Australian researcher Alex Joske details in his superb 2022 book "Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World," the Chinese Ministry of State Security's "symbiosis with united front networks, business empires, public diplomacy and universities is as strong as ever."

Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.), chair of the U.S. Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said last month that "We're just beginning to scratch the surface in terms of this activity on American soil." The pervasiveness of the problem is clear, but the solution to shutting down Chinese operations inside the U.S. is far from easy.

Chinese agents do not always operate under the cover of a government affiliation, such as a diplomatic posting. The CCP commonly recruits (or otherwise convinces) ordinary Chinese citizens, such as university students and businesspeople, to participate in its spying and influence campaigns.

U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies cannot track the activities of every single Chinese national in the U.S., as a matter of both practicality and non-discrimination. But it can take a few steps to close gaps.

First, Congress should broaden the legal parameters of what constitutes illegal Chinese operations in the U.S., with a special concentration on the academic and business arenas. For example, all activities associated with China's Thousand Talents program, which recruits Western scientists to China to funnel American know-how to Chinese institutions, should be viewed as supporting espionage and intellectual property theft and consequently shut down.

Chinese commercial entities, which have been under-scrutinized by law enforcement as front companies, must be regarded as espionage platforms, with their members either prosecuted or expelled. Finally, the federal government must increase reporting requirements surrounding contact between Chinese nationals and U.S. government officials (including members of Congress and their staffers) and individuals supporting the U.S. defense-industrial base.

Ultimately, no patchwork of laws, no matter how thorough, will be adequate to the task of stopping Chinese espionage. It will require multiple segments of society to treat the motives, affiliations, and money of Chinese nationals — and Americans defending Chinese interests — with much higher degrees of suspicion.

This higher level of scrutiny raises uncomfortable questions at the intersection of national security, civil liberties, and race. But only a whole-of-society vigilance can counteract a Chinese communist espionage and influence offensive that is running rampant in every corner of American society and throughout the world.

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