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Political espionage

'On a par with the Russians': rise in Chinese espionage alarms Europe



Western spy chiefs say sophistication of Beijing's intelligence operations is now comparable to the Kremlin's

John Paul Rathbone in London and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 6 HOURS
AGO

It was like an episode of the television spy thriller *The Bureau*. A senior French intelligence officer known as Henri M is posted to Beijing, where he falls in love with the ambassador's interpreter and starts to pass secret information to the enemy.

Soon after, he is recalled to France and, at a trial in 2020, sentenced to eight years in jail for passing "prejudicial information" to a foreign power — even though the offence was committed two decades before. A fellow agent known as Pierre-Marie H, who continued to spy for China until his arrest in 2017, was given a 12-year sentence at the same trial.

The agents' tough sentences, and France's decision to highlight their activities by holding a trial, reflect increasing European concern that China's espionage operations are growing in scope and pose a bigger threat than those by Russia — the west's traditional adversary.

"Chinese intelligence operatives are on a par with the Russians," said a former Europe station chief for the CIA, the US intelligence agency. "China's best operations are now as good as Russia's best," confirmed one current western intelligence official. Some of them are "exquisite . . . in their patience", added a second.

China is already well known for advanced cyber attacks, such as the 2021 Microsoft hack, which compromised 30,000 organisations globally and that the US, EU and UK said was carried out by criminal groups working at Beijing's behest. China denied the allegations, calling them "groundless and irresponsible".

But its human intelligence, or HUMINT, skills have acquired a level of sophistication usually associated with [Russian espionage](#), according to eight current and former western intelligence officials, adding to the sense of alarm in the west.





Christine Lee was singled out by MI5 this year when it issued a public warning that she was an 'agent of influence' for China © British Chinese Project /Eyepress/Reuters

“The Russians have been into espionage since the days of the tsar [before the Soviet Union], they just love it,” said Alex Younger, former head of MI6, the UK’s secret intelligence service. “Traditionally, the Chinese have significantly weaker HUMINT but they’ve been on a steep learning curve.”

The rise in covert activity by China’s ruling Communist party was described as [a “game-changing” challenge](#) by Ken McCallum, head of British domestic intelligence service MI5, and FBI chief Christopher Wray, his US counterpart, at a joint conference in London last month.

“We’re not crying wolf,” said McCallum, his warning all the more stark as it came amid Russia’s assault on Ukraine, Europe’s biggest security threat in a generation.

With China’s spying techniques also very different to Russia’s, western agencies are having to [reconfigure their approach](#) to counter-intelligence.

Christine Lee, a lawyer and UK national, was singled out by MI5 this year when it took the unusual step of issuing a public warning that she was an [“agent of influence” for China](#), even though her alleged pro-Beijing transgressions were not criminal.

“Chinese espionage is not even a variant of the Russian [approach],” the second intelligence official said. “Just agreeing what constitutes a Chinese agent can be hard.”

Officials said Russia’s foreign operations still typically drew on a tradition of elite case officers, trained in spy craft techniques such as encoded communications, to achieve a specific security objective. China, however, has broader aims, ranging from political influencing to obtaining commercial or technological secrets.

“Russian spying tends to be tightly focused, whereas China uses a ‘whole of society’ approach,” said a third intelligence official. They referenced China’s 2017 intelligence law requiring “all organisations and citizens” to “support, assist and co-operate with national intelligence efforts”.

Russian espionage also tends to be high-risk, even “thuggish”, said a fourth official, citing the attempted poisoning of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal in England in 2018.

“The Russians can be clumsy, quite arrogant and sometimes seem to possess a ‘catch me if you can’ mentality” but “the Chinese would rather avoid any kind of spy scandal because they want to preserve good bilateral relations”, added the former CIA officer.

The difference in the two countries’ styles is captured by an adage often cited by western officials, which imagines grains of sand as intelligence targets.

While Russian agents would surface a submarine at night and send a small party to the beach to bring back a bucket of sand, the Chinese would send in thousands of bathers in broad daylight to bring back the bigger haul of just one grain each.

The result, according to Nicholas Eftimiades, a China expert and former CIA officer, is “a new paradigm on how intelligence activities are conducted”.

Such tactics can lead to inefficient and uncoordinated spying, western officials said, with several Chinese officers sometimes approaching the same target. Even so, it is often effective.

One US estimate suggested that Chinese commercial espionage stole as much as \$600bn of US intellectual property every year. China has denied the claims. [The EU has estimated](#) that total IP theft costs it €50bn in sales every year, with the loss of 671,000 jobs.

“Efficacy is more important to China’s security services than efficiency,” said Nigel Inkster, a former MI6 director of operations and now a senior adviser at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

An extra challenge, officials said, is identifying exactly who is a Chinese spy without resorting to [racial profiling of potential suspects](#).

Again, the difference with Russia is striking. European capitals have expelled more than 600 Russian diplomats and alleged spies since Moscow launched this year’s invasion of Ukraine.

But “a similar situation with Beijing would be more difficult”, Inkster said, as the relationship between the Chinese state and its actors can be tenuous and fluid.

Some counter-intelligence officials also believe that the “grains of sand” analogy is misleading as it obscures China’s more recent, sophisticated work.

Whatever the approach, western agencies are struggling to cope with the volume of cases. The FBI has said it opens a new investigation into Chinese espionage every 12 hours while MI5’s caseload has risen sevenfold since 2018, it has said.

Wray, the FBI chief, said: “The scale of China’s efforts is breathtaking.”

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