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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Global Health; Afghanistan; China; Japan; Taiwan

CHINA USED STOLEN DATA TO EXPOSE CIA OPERATIVES

China's intelligence services have successfully identified dozens of U.S. spies by pairing the vast troves of sensitive personal private information and government personnel records previously hacked from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) with travel details and other purloined data, bio information, career milestones, etc. This was a "suave and professional utilization" of these datasets, it wasn't "random or generic. It's a big-data problem," said an anonymous former U.S. official. One consequence is that undercover CIA personnel arriving in Africa and Europe have been rapidly identified by China's intelligence services. Sometimes the resulting surveillance is overt, suggesting the Chinese side wants U.S. intelligence officials to know that American operatives have been identified. In one case, a Chinese operative tried to entrap a U.S. official's wife while she was with her children on a school field trip. At other times, however, the Chinese surveillance was subtle and only detected through sophisticated counter-surveillance operations. (Foreign Policy, December 21, 2020)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In the OPM breach, Chinese hackers stole detailed personnel data from 21.5 million current and former U.S. officials, their spouses, and job applicants, including health, residency, employment, fingerprint, and financial data. This included details from background investigations tied to the granting of security clearances. Although the U.S. did not disclose the breach until 2015, U.S. intelligence officials became aware of the initial hack back in 2012.]

TAIWAN IS A "RED LINE"— JAPANESE DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER TO BIDEN

"We are concerned China will expand its aggressive stance into areas other than Hong Kong. I think one of the next targets, or what everyone is worried about, is Taiwan. So far, I haven't yet seen a clear policy or an announcement on Taiwan from Joe Biden. I would like to hear it quickly, then we can also prepare our response on Taiwan in accordance," said Japan's State Minister of Defense Yasuhide Nakayama. Nakayama called Taiwan safety a "red line," and urged President-elect Joe Biden to "be strong" and support the island. "How will Joe Biden in the White House react in any case if China crosses this red line? The United States is the leader of the democratic countries. I have a strong feeling to say: America, be strong!" he said. In recent months, Beijing has ratcheted up pressure on Taipei, with dozens of PLA fighter jet forays taking place ever closer to the island. (Reuters, December 25, 2020)

FOREIGN STUDENTS ANGRY THEY CANNOT RETURN TO CHINA

Hundreds of thousands of foreign students that were forced to leave their universities in China due to the pandemic have yet to receive word as to when they will be able to return. Beijing cancelled all visas back in March, and since then restrictions on foreign student visas have remained unchanged, leading many to grow increasingly angry. More than 6,500 foreign students signed an online petition calling on Beijing to allow them to return using the #TakeUsBackToChina hashtag. "All my support for China has changed totally. We loved China so much. I was always defending China when friends and family back home blamed Chinese people's eating habits for the virus and when they made hate speech," said an anonymous African student who feared losing his scholarship. (South China Morning Post, December 26, 2020)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Over the past 10 years, the number of government-funded international students has increased nearly six-fold. In 2018, China had 492,000 foreign students and the pre-COVID19 2020 admissions target was 500,000. The U.S. hosts more than a million foreign students.]

AFGHANISTAN BUSTS CHINA'S KABUL SPY RING

Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) has detained 10 PRC citizens linked to the Ministry of State Security for espionage and running a terror cell. At least two of those apprehended were in contact with the Haqqani Network, the terrorist group and military arm of the Taliban. Mr. Li Yangyang had been gathering information for Chinese intelligence about al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Uyghurs in Kunar and Badakhshan provinces. Ms. Sha Hung runs a restaurant in Kabul, where the NDS recovered "explosive material and other incriminating items." Their arrests preceded the capture of the other eight. First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, the former chief of Afghan intelligence, is overseeing the investigation and is "engaging the Chinese in view of the sensitivities involved." At a meeting between Saleh and China's envoy, Wang Yu, Saleh said Kabul would consider a pardon if Beijing submits a formal apology that admits to the violation of international norms and a betrayal of Afghan trust. If it doesn't, Saleh warned, Kabul will hold trials. Beijing has tried to persuade Kabul to cover up the case. (Hindustan Times, December 25 2020)

LEAKED DIRECTIVES REVEAL HOW BEIJING CONTROLLED COVID19 MESSAGE

More than 3,200 directives and 1,800 memos have been obtained from the Hangzhou offices of the Cyberspace Administration of China on the early days of the COVID19 outbreak. The detailed documents reveal how Beijing sought to shape public opinion surrounding the virus. After the death of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, authorities instructed news websites not to send notifications to readers, told social platforms to remove his name from trending topics pages, and activated legions of online commenters to flood social sites with chatter. One directive stressed the need for discretion: "As commenters fight to guide public opinion, they must conceal their identity, avoid crude patriotism and sarcastic praise, and be sleek and silent in achieving results." Multiple directives emphasized that "negative" news should not be promoted. "Pay particular attention to posts with pictures of candles, people wearing masks, an entirely black image or other efforts to escalate or hype the incident," read one directive, another said "to avoid causing societal panic" headlines should not use the words "incurable," "fatal," and "lockdown." Propaganda workers in Hangzhou worked around-the-clock shifts to spread the party line: that the CPC had the virus under control. Officials in one district reported that their posts had been read more than 40,000 times, "effectively eliminating city residents' panic." Another said it had deployed 1500 "cybersoldiers" to monitor WeChat groups. (New York Times, December 19, 2020)