



China Policy Monitor No. 1583

February 12, 2024 Joshua Eisenman

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Japan; Russia; United States

U.S. DISABLES PRC CYBER THREAT

The U.S. has dismantled a vast PRC hacking operation known as "Volt Typhoon" which had infiltrated thousands of wireless devices. The initiative, spearheaded by the Justice Department and the FBI, neutralized the cyber espionage campaign's threat to critical infrastructure, including ports and utilities. The Volt Typhoon group infects devices to create a bot network that can conceal hackers' activities, making it hard for cybersecurity teams to detect and respond to intrusions. Taking down the network required collaboration between the U.S. government and the private technology sector, telecoms and cloud computing companies. (*Business Times*, January 31, 2024)

XI PROMISED BIDEN CHINA WOULDN'T INTERFERE IN THE 2024 ELECTION

When they met in California in November 2023, Xi Jinping told President Biden that China would not interfere in the upcoming 2024 presidential election. In Bangkok in late January, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi reiterated that assurance to national security adviser Jake Sullivan. The Foreign Ministry also issued a formal statement on the matter: "We always adhere to the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. U.S. general elections are U.S. internal affairs and who becomes the next president is up to the American people. China does not interfere in U.S. elections." American officials, however, are skeptical. At a Congressional hearing in late January, FBI Director Christopher Wray said of the assurance: "I'll believe it when I see it." (*CNN*, January 31, 2024)

NEW PRC DEFENSE MINISTER HOLDS FIRST TALKS WITH RUSSIAN COUNTERPART

In his first foreign meeting as China's new defense minister, Dong Jun held a video conference with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu. In the face of global challenges, the Chinese and Russian militaries should bolster mutual trust and expand cooperation to "elevate the relations between the two militaries to a higher level," Dong told Shoigu. Shoigu, for his part, said his talks with Dong would "further strengthen the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in the field of defense. Russian-Chinese military relations are developing steadily in all directions. We regularly hold joint naval, air and land combat training activities, and have successfully conducted combat exercises of different levels of complexity." (*South China Morning Post*, February 1, 2024)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Dong, the former commander of the PLA Navy, was named minister on December 29th. The post was left vacant for more than two months after his predecessor, Li Shangfu, was sacked in October without explanation. There is an anti-corruption campaign being conducted within the PLA, with many senior commanders and generals under investigation.]

THE NUMBER OF CHINESE STUDENTS FALLS AS SCRUTINY RISES

The number of Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities has declined for the fourth consecutive year. According to the Open Doors 2023 Report by the Institute of International Education, the number of Chinese students in the U.S. declined from 372,500 in the 2019-20 academic year to 289,500 in the 2022-23 academic year. One reason is that the U.S., Canada, and European countries are enhancing security screenings of Chinese students to contain PRC espionage activities. Canada has recently restricted access to students from universities affiliated with China's military institutions and is no longer funding research projects with them. Chinese scholars with military backgrounds have participated in about 3000 projects with European universities. (*AsiaNews*, February 1, 2024)

CHINA HACKS JAPAN'S DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATIONS

Japan's foreign ministry has been the target of China-based cyberattacks since at least 2020, resulting in "sensitive information" being "compromised." Beijing hacked Tokyo's diplomatic communications system, which secures Japan's official classified correspondence. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said the government had not confirmed whether secret information was accessed in the cyberattacks. In this year's poll conducted by Japan's Cabinet Office, anti-China sentiment hit a record, with 87% of respondents reporting "unfriendly" attitudes toward the country; up from 81.8% last year. (*Washington Times*, February 5, 2024)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In South Korea, polls over the past two years show that China has replaced Japan as the most disliked nation. Seoul and Tokyo are now aligning more closely on regional defense, diplomacy, intelligence-sharing and military drills with the U.S.]