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NETHERLANDS DISCOVERS MALWARE, ACCUSES CHINA OF SPYING

A PRC state actor has been carrying out a longstanding cyber espionage campaign against the Netherlands, the country's Defense Minister, Kaja Ollongren, has said. Last year, the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) discovered advanced Chinese malware, named Coathanger, in its computer network. "The MIVD is choosing for the first time to publish a technical report on the working methods of Chinese hackers. It is important to attribute such espionage activities to China. This is how we increase international resilience against this type of cyberespionage," said Ollongren. (*NL Times*, February 6, 2024)

BEIJING WARNS CHINESE STUDENTS TO AVOID FOREIGN SPIES

China's Ministry of State Security has warned overseas Chinese students to be on guard against contacts from foreign spies. In a WeChat post this week, the ministry said that in 2006 a Chinese graduate student, surnamed Zhang, attended an unnamed elite university abroad and was paid by foreign spies to leak sensitive Chinese scientific research and intelligence. Zhang became "a puppet" and stole state secrets and monitored his fellow overseas Chinese students. After returning to China, he continued to spy but was caught and "severely punished." The post comes on the heels of a new counter-espionage law that broadens the definition of spying and banned sharing any information "related to national security and interests." (*Semafor*, February 7, 2024)

CHINA'S FAKE NEWS WEBSITES PUSH PROPAGANDA IN 30 COUNTRIES

Chinese websites are posing as local news outlets to disseminate anti-U.S. and pro-Beijing content, according to Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto. The campaign, dubbed "Paperwall," is a network of at least 123 websites operating from China posing as local news outlets in thirty countries across Asia, Europe, and Latin America. A Chinese PR firm, Shenzhen Haimaiyunxiang Media Co., Ltd., (a.k.a. Haimai), is running the network of fake news outlets. "The campaign is an example of a sprawling influence operation serving both financial and political interests, and in alignment with Beijing's political agenda. These findings confirm the increasingly important role private firms play in the realm of digital influence operations and the propensity of the Chinese government to make use of them," Citizen Lab has said. In November, South Korea spy agency identified 38 fake Korean-language news websites with ties to Haimai. (*Newsweek*, February 9, 2024)

CHINESE-BORN AUSTRALIAN COMMENTATOR SENTENCED TO DEATH

Chinese-born Australian political commentator Yang Hengjun has been sentenced to death for "espionage" – a sentence which can be commuted to life imprisonment after two years. Between 2015 and 2016, Yang published several articles critical of Beijing in *The Diplomat* before being arrested in January 2019 during a trip to China. While in jail, he has been deprived of medical care and subjected to more than 300 interrogations. China ranks 179th out of 180 countries in the 2023 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, and is the world's largest captor of journalists, with at least 120 detained. (Reporters Without Borders, February 5, 2024)

AFTER MESSI MISSES HK MATCH, CHINA'S FOOTBALL ASSN CUTS TIES WITH ARGENTINA

China's Football Association has severed ties with the Argentine Football Association and the Argentine national team after soccer star Lionel Messi missed a friendly match in Hong Kong, but played in Japan days later. Messi, who sat out of the Hong Kong game due to a hamstring injury, disappointed the sell-out crowd of 40,000 fans, who paid as much as \$507 per ticket. The official *Global Times* said the no-show, his only on the Asia tour, showed discrimination against China, and Regina Ip, the convenor of Hong Kong's executive council, wrote on X: "Hong Kong people hate Messi, Inter Miami, and the black hand behind them, for the deliberate and calculated snub to Hong Kong." Messi responded on Weibo: "Anyone who knows me knows that I always want to play especially in these games where we travel so far and people are excited to see our games." The game's organizer, Tatler Asia, has given 50% refunds, at the cost of \$7.2 million. (*The Sun*, February 8, 2024; *The Guardian*, February 9, 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.]