



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on September 12, 2023

British Media: Alleged China Spies Enjoyed High-level Government Access

A researcher working for the U.K. House of Commons and a second man were arrested in March on allegations that they had spied for China, according to British news outlet *The Sunday Times* on September 9.

The researcher supposedly worked on international policy and had connections to various “senior Tory MPs,” some of whom were privy to “classified or highly sensitive information,” such as Minister of State for Security Tom Tugendhat and Alicia Kearns, chairwoman of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee.



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In a brief statement, the Metropolitan Police Service (Met) verified claims that a man in his 30s was arrested in Oxfordshire and a man in his 20s was detained in Edinburgh under the Official Secrets Act in March this year. “Searches were also carried out at residential properties, as well as at a third address in east London,” the Met revealed. Both suspects were released on bail until October.

Met’s Counter Terrorism Command, which deals with espionage-related crimes, is conducting a probe on the case.

“While I recognize the public interest, we all have a duty to ensure any work of the authorities is not jeopardized,” Kearns said, refusing to further comment on the matter.

A source acquainted with Kearns told PA Media that, should the accusations be true, there would be a “serious escalation” with Beijing.

Hostilities between China and the West have risen in recent years, with the heads of MI5 and the FBI issuing a joint statement in July 2022 lambasting Beijing as “the biggest long-term threat.”

U.K. Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, however, adopted a more conciliatory position during his visit to Beijing late last month, highlighting that Britain needs a “pragmatic, sensible working relationship with China” and disregarding calls to entirely decouple from China.

Beijing has constantly dismissed claims of espionage and instead slammed Western nations for starting a global smear campaign, urging the West to ditch “its Cold War mentality.”

“We are always firmly opposed to espionage activities. We hope relevant parties will stop smearing China with groundless accusations,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning declared in June.

On August 30, British spies cautioned Cleverly and his team to be on guard against attractive women who could allure and blackmail them during his entourage’s visit to China, based on a *Daily Mail* report.

Cleverly met with Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and Vice President Han Zhen. The British Foreign Office confirmed that Cleverly would broach the subject of “malign cyber activity” during the talks, following earlier [news](#) that Chinese and Russian “hackers” had violated its security systems.



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The *Daily Mail* report also revealed that Cleverly's delegation had undergone some weeks of security training before the trip. For instance, they were instructed to leave their smartphones and laptops at home, and to regard every hotel and meeting room as wiretapped.

"Civil servants should expect their accommodation to be wired for sound and video. Your hotel room is not a private space," a government source told the newspaper.

The team members were also told to be wary of what the *Daily Mail* labeled "glamorous women," who could shower attention on them before stealing from or blackmailing them. A Foreign Office spokesman informed the paper that "extensive security measures" were the norm for such high-profile foreign visits.

There is no proof thus far that Cleverly or his entourage had such experiences in China, and owing to the nature of spying, states seldom acknowledge tracking foreign officials. For instance, Washington's eavesdropping of ex-German chancellor Angela Merkel remained behind closed doors until NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden spilled the beans. Similarly, America's wiretapping of South Korean government communications was kept hidden until it was divulged in leaked Pentagon documents earlier this year.

For years, British authorities have alleged that China relies on so-called "honey trapping" to obtain information from Western men. In a 2009 document, the U.K.'s domestic intelligence agency, MI5, cautioned banks and businesses that female Chinese intelligence operatives were known to pursue "long-term relationships" with Western targets, and to "exploit vulnerabilities such as sexual relationships ... to pressurize individuals to cooperate with them."

On its end, China has repeatedly dismissed such allegations. Last year, when FBI Director Christopher Wray and MI5 Director Ken McCallum cautioned that Beijing was still targeting Western businesses, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian lambasted the two Western spy chiefs for "creating imaginary enemies" and "trying to project their own disgraceful acts onto China."

In August this year, [China's](#) Ministry of State Security unveiled a public account on a popular social media platform, WeChat, to encourage "all members of society" to join its campaign against foreign espionage, promising rewards and protection for those who volunteer information.

With their post titled "Countering espionage requires the mobilization of all members of society," the ministry asserted that national security bodies should ensure that reporting channels such as hotlines and online platforms be open to swiftly tackle reports of suspected espionage within China.

The security ministry supervises intelligence and counterintelligence both within China and abroad, and has been likened to the CIA and FBI. However, unlike the CIA and the FBI, it does not have a public website showcasing its activities.

Additionally, the ministry's debut WeChat post revealed new amendments to a counter-espionage law passed by China's rubber-stamp legislature earlier this year, which materialized on July 1.

The post added that news outlets, broadcasters, television stations, the culture sector, and internet providers should also be involved in anti-espionage education.

China passed a sweeping counterespionage law in 2014, which some observers contended was already "ambiguous and powerful." The law was updated in April to encompass more aspects of society and life.

For years, Chinese authorities have used propaganda and incentives to encourage the public to expose suspected foreign spies and their Chinese collaborators, and under leader Xi Jinping, who has made national security his top priority, such efforts to unearth suspected foreign spies have only increased in



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momentum.



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