

# Western concerns over Chinese espionage

Kristian L. Nielsen

The recent spate of stories about Chinese espionage in European business and political circles underline how relations with China are increasingly securitised.



Picture: BBC

## Introduction

There have been a number of high-profile cases of Chinese espionage in Europe lately. Just this week, a researcher on the staff of the chair of the British Parliament's foreign policy committee was [charged with spying for China](#). And a staffer for the German Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party was also arrested, charged with [passing information](#) on European Parliament members.

These cases join a long list of accusations and growing concerns over Chinese espionage in the West, and particularly in Europe. For some, the accusations against China are little more than panicked scaremongering with a [smack of McCarthyism](#). Indeed, the trusty old

[racism card](#) has been played as a way of deflecting concerns. For others, the many recent cases are proof that the [West has been naïve](#) for far too long, and is in grave danger of making the same mistake made with Russia prior to the war in Ukraine, of letting them act with impunity and insert themselves far too deeply in the Western economy.

### Not a new thing

With China, industrial espionage has been a long-standing concern. Both with regards to technology being stolen when Western companies establish production facilities in China and, of the old-fashioned kind, [intellectual property being stolen](#) clandestinely in Europe, not least through cyber theft. In a recent revelation, [German media reported](#) that Volkswagen had been the victim of a long-running hack from China, resulting in some 19.000 documents being stolen.

At the same time, universities in Western countries have also felt the heat. For a community that traditionally values communication and knowledge sharing, it has been a rude awakening to find intelligence services warning of infiltration and the national security implications of theft of intellectual property. Concerns have been raised about the activities of both [Chinese students](#) studying at Western universities and about [Chinese faculty](#). Particularly as several graduate students in technological fields, working on dual-use technologies, have had [ties to the Chinese military](#) and have returned to positions at the National University of Defence Technology upon completion of the studies in Europe. This comes at a time when the Chinese government is [subjecting diaspora communities](#) to greater pressure and intimidation. While the potential damage such Chinese state activities can cause is considerable, so are the human costs for those Chinese academics who have been [falsely accused](#), as has happened.

Another ongoing example of how all things Chinese are increasingly securitized is the furore over the social media app TikTok. In the US, [legislation has just been passed](#) that compels the sale of the app to a Western operator, or, failing that, will ban the app completely. Meanwhile the European Commission and several European governments have banned the app from all official electronic devices for fear that it can be used for spying. All this is highly embarrassing for those, like Germany's Olaf Scholz, who favour closer ties

with China. Scholz [personally authorised](#) the Chinese company COSCO to acquire a large stake in the ownership of the Port of Hamburg, a key piece of critical infrastructure. The [UK, by contrast](#), having once planned to include Chinese investments and contractors in the building of a new generation of nuclear power plants, reversed course in 2022 and decided to work with European partners only.

Yet, the German chancellor is not alone in continuing to seek closer partnerships with China, even as this approach is coming under increased scrutiny. Whether it is continuing to attract Chinese students and researchers to a country's universities, seeking Chinese infrastructure investments, or simply chasing opportunities on the Chinese market, there are plenty of takers. Scholz's conciliatory line during his recent visit to Beijing showed that the partnership impulse is still strong, to the [predictable fury](#) of the 'China hawks'.

## Conclusion

It is in the very nature of espionage that we, the public, do not know the full picture. Are the latest revelations evidence of a broader pattern, or are they just being sensationalized? China itself has called the allegations ["hype...intended to discredit and suppress China"](#).

Some may indeed argue that too much is read into isolated cases and that the threat is being exaggerated. Others will counter that if so, there is an awful lot of smoke without any fire, and therefore one better be safe than sorry. The fact remains that relations with China are increasingly securitized, and the recent spate of juicy stories will not help. In any case, the mere fact that so many cases are becoming public knowledge is a sign of a deteriorating relationship between the West and China.

*Kristian L. Nielsen is a research fellow at the Corvinus Centre for Contemporary Asia Studies (CAS), Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies.*

*All opinions expressed in this commentary are the author's and do not represent an institutional viewpoint on behalf of CAS or the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies.*