# The spies among us

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For a nation that has long aspired to become the No. 1 superpower, it’s only natural that China keeps tabs on any country that may jeopardize its ambition. Ergo, it has eyes and ears everywhere around the globe—the Philippines included.

In May 2024, a BBC report, citing information from an unnamed Western intelligence official, estimated that Beijing had “around 600,000 people working on intelligence and security, more than any other state in the world.”

In fact, the threat of Chinese espionage had so rattled the West that in October 2023, the security chiefs of the so-called Five Eyes—the intelligence-sharing pact among the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand—accused Beijing of intellectual property theft and using artificial intelligence for hacking and spying against the allies.

Besides spies and hackers, China’s surveillance operations manifest in other ways, such as its “overseas police stations,” including one that was discovered in the middle of New York City, purportedly to keep track of Chinese dissidents abroad.

## A man of many hats

And so, it came as a shock to no one when Philippine authorities announced last week the arrest of an alleged “sleeper agent” from China: Deng Yuanqing, an individual described by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) as a man of many hats–a “software engineer,” “financier,” and graduate of the People’s Liberation Army University of Science and Technology in Nanjing, who “specializes in control and automation engineering.”

According to the NBI, Deng’s Filipino accomplices Ronel Jojo Balundo Besa and Jayson Amado Fernandez confessed to serving as the Chinese man’s driver and assistant while he visited military facilities, police headquarters, government offices, and even power installations.

“We saw that some of the [targeted] areas are Edca sites,” said Armed Forces of the Philippines chief Romeo Brawner Jr., referring to the bases covered by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (Edca) between the Philippine and US militaries.

The three were arrested on Jan. 17 at a condominium in Makati City. Seized from them were an SUV equipped with devices the suspects allegedly used to survey the country. Before their arrest, investigators found that the suspects had finished mapping the entire Luzon.

On Wednesday, the Bureau of Immigration revealed more details about the alleged Chinese spy: He is 39, married to a Filipino woman, and has been in and out of the country since 2015.

## Stop ‘peddling’ spy story

Attempting to “connect the dots,” Rear Adm. Roy Vincent Trinidad, the Philippine Navy spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea, said Deng’s arrest might be connected to other worrying developments, such as the recovery of submersible drones in local waters and the discovery of foreign nationals with falsified Philippine identification cards and birth certificates. “[There] seems now to be a deliberate and calculated move to map out the country by a foreign power,” he told a press briefing.

But China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted with fury at the insinuation. “We hope the Philippines will stick to the facts, stop shadow-chasing, stop peddling the so-called ‘Chinese spy’ [story], and earnestly protect the lawful rights and interests of Chinese nationals in the Philippines,” the ministry’s spokesperson Mao Ning said in Beijing.

But is it really a stretch to assume that the Philippines is now teeming with Chinese spies, considering Manila’s maritime conflict with Beijing in the West Philippine Sea has placed the former squarely in the latter’s crosshairs?

## A clear and present danger

Last year, the unmasking of dismissed Bamban, Tarlac Mayor Alice Guo as a potential Chinese agent should have been the first clue that there are spies living among us, discreetly gathering sensitive information and transmitting it back to their home country. It’s just as clear that despite the shutdown of Philippine offshore gaming operators, many Chinese continue to stay here illegally. How many of them are living double lives as spies?

Worse, there are Filipinos, like Deng’s pair of accomplices, who are more than happy to assist them in their nefarious mission for a little bit of cash.

All these are telltale signs of the country’s vulnerability. National Security Adviser Eduardo Año’s call to modernize espionage laws is sound and worth pursuing, but the greater imperative is to empower the country’s intelligence capability. It’s time that the government put those hard-to-audit intelligence and confidential funds to good use, instead of dolloping them out for political favors.

The evidence is mounting: Chinese espionage is a clear and present danger that the nation must confront head-on. To this end, the authorities must act decisively to flush out all spies and protect military assets and civilian infrastructure. Otherwise, Manila will pay dearly for its complacency should it fail to safeguard national secrets from Beijing’s prying eyes.