

Foreign Office summons senior Chinese diplomat over 'malicious cyber activity'

Publication Date: 2024-03-26

Author: Eleni Courea

Section: Technology

Tags: Cyberwar, Espionage, Hacking, Internet, China, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/mar/26/foreign-office-summons-senior-chinese-diplomat-over-malicious-cyber-activity>



Ministers summoned a senior Chinese diplomat to the Foreign Office on Tuesday after accusing Beijing-backed hackers of a cyber-attack on the British elections watchdog and a surveillance operation on politicians. The department called in China's chargé d'affaires and told him the UK would not tolerate "threatening" cyber-attacks. An FCDO spokesperson said the ministry had "set out the government's unequivocal condemnation of Chinese state-affiliated organisations and individuals undertaking malicious cyber activity against UK democratic institutions and parliamentarians". "The UK government would not tolerate such threatening activity, and would continue to take strong action with partners across the globe to respond," they said. The summons came after the deputy prime minister, Oliver Dowden, announced sanctions on Monday on a company and two individuals accused of involvement in China's malicious cyber activity. But ministers faced criticism from Tory MPs including Robert Jenrick, the former immigration minister, and Alicia Kearns, the chair of the foreign affairs select committee, who called the government's actions "feeble" and "insufficient". Rishi Sunak defended his approach to China, insisting the UK was "undoubtedly more robust than most of our allies". MPs on the liaison committee challenged him on the government's reluctance to act on Chinese-owned companies such as ByteDance, which owns TikTok. The prime minister told MPs the UK had introduced stronger export controls for sensitive technologies and a tougher foreign investment scheme than other countries. "On trade, we are already less dependent on China for trade than Australia, Korea, Japan, the US, Germany and many other countries," he said. "I am entirely confident that our approach to dealing with the risk that China poses is very much in line with our allies and in most cases goes further in protecting ourselves." Sunak also cited the government's decision to remove Huawei equipment from the UK's telecommunications networks, which Boris Johnson took in 2020 after a major rebellion by Tory backbenchers. Dowden indicated on Tuesday that the government was preparing to put China in the enhanced tier of the government's new foreign influence registration scheme. This would require organisations or individuals to register with the government if they carry out advocacy or campaigning activities on Beijing's behalf. The prime minister's spokesperson said the scheme was "in the process of being finalised and no countries have been specified yet". Dowden told MPs on Monday that ministers were "in the process of collective government agreement" on the matter and that "the conduct that I have described today will have a very strong bearing on the decision that we make in respect of it". Ministers are also under pressure to formally designate China a threat to UK security in the government's integrated review, which sets out the country's foreign, defence and security policies. It currently refers to China as an "epoch-defining challenge". The education secretary, Gillian Keegan, told Times Radio that China was

“obviously a security threat”. There are differing views in government about how robust an approach to take against China, which is one of the UK’s biggest trading partners. The sanctions announced on Monday were part of a joint action by the UK and its allies to reveal the scale of Chinese cyber-espionage activities, with the US charging seven alleged Chinese hackers.