

Suspected Chinese spies, disguised as tourists, tried to infiltrate Alaskan military bases

ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Chinese citizens **posing as tourists** but suspected of being spies have made several attempts in recent years to gain access to military facilities in this vast state studded with sensitive bases, according to U.S. officials.

In one incident, a vehicle with Chinese citizens blew past a security checkpoint at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks, several soldiers told USA TODAY. The vehicle was eventually stopped, and a search found a drone inside the vehicle. The occupants claimed they were tourists who had gotten lost.

Many of the encounters have been chalked up to innocent mistakes by foreign visitors intent on viewing the northern lights and other attractions in Alaska, officials say. **Other attempts to enter U.S. military bases, however, seem to be probes to learn about U.S. military capabilities in Alaska**, according to multiple soldiers familiar with the incidents but who were not authorized to speak publicly about them.

Not all who appear to be tourists in Alaska, are, in fact tourists, one Army officer said. Instead, they are **foreign spies**.

Details about the incidents remain mostly classified. However, military briefings and publicly available information lay out why the Chinese government would be interested in **Alaska where some of the Pentagon's most sophisticated military capabilities and high-end war games reside**. The Pentagon's No. 2 official, Kathleen Hicks, demurred when asked to comment on suspected Chinese spying at military facilities in Alaska. She said the military is taking a number of steps to make sure those bases are secure but she gave no specifics.

FBI and Justice Department involvement

The FBI and Department of Justice take over cases from the military involving suspected spies. FBI Director Christopher Wray regularly sounds alarms about Chinese government-sponsored espionage, blaming Communist leaders there, not its citizens or Chinese Americans. Wray has estimated that the FBI opens a new investigation on Chinese-government sponsored espionage every 12 hours.

“There is no doubt that the greatest long-term threat to our nation’s ideas, our economic security and our national security is that posed by the Chinese communist government,” Wray said in a speech in April.

A key concern about intrusions on U.S. military bases may have as much to do about **what is left behind** than photos taken, said David Deptula, a retired three-star Air Force general who was the service's senior officer for intelligence. **Spies could leave behind sensors** that could pick up sensitive communications, according to Deptula, who is now dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Power Studies.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not respond to emails and phone calls requesting comment.

Why Alaska? Radars, missiles, cutting-edge war games

Alaska hosts three large military bases – Joint Base **Elmendorf-Richardson** in Anchorage, and **Fort Wainwright** and **Eielson Air Force Base** near Fairbanks – along with several smaller installations.

Once regarded as a backwater in the military, Alaska has seen the Pentagon increasingly funnel resources and troops to the state in recent years as competition in the Arctic heats up. The state is also seen as key to homeland defense given its proximity to Russia, the ballistic missile threat from North Korea and, increasingly, China. The Air Force has based its top fighter jets, **F-22s and F-35s**, in Alaska. The Army's **Fort Greely**, near Fairbanks, has sophisticated radars and missiles poised to defend against nuclear attack. Last year, the Army activated the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska as arctic warfare specialists. There are about 12,000 soldiers and 10,000 active-duty Air Force personnel stationed in Alaska.

Alaska's vast wilderness affords the Pentagon the opportunity to conduct major military exercises over land and at sea. Thousands of troops and more than 150 warplanes from the United States, United Kingdom and Australia warplanes took part in the recent Northern Edge war game. The annual exercise helps troops train against the United States' greatest military adversaries: Russia and China.

Tensions between the United States and China have **risen over the last year**. The Chinese spy balloon crossed the United States caused a diplomatic rupture, prompting secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel a trip to Beijing. China's support for Russia after its illegal invasion of Ukraine is another point of friction. And China's designs on Taiwan, the recipient of billions in U.S. military aid, have deepened distrust. Those tensions were highlighted May 26 when a Chinese fighter jet had a dangerous encounter with a U.S. spy plane flying over international waters in the South China Sea, according to the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Command. The Chinese jet flew in front of the U.S. Air Force Rivet Joint reconnaissance, forcing it to encounter turbulence, the Indo-Pacific Command announced Tuesday.

Alaska's size – two-and-a-half times the size of Texas – remoteness and savage winter cold, once viewed as protective barriers, provide less security for prying eyes. Global warming has opened shipping lanes in the Arctic, and the Pentagon has tracked Chinese fishing fleets moving farther north toward Alaska in recent years in search of greater catches.

Beefed up security at military sites

Security at some military sites in Alaska has been beefed up as the Pentagon focuses on the arctic, two officials said.

In a September interview with the Pentagon's news agency last fall, Iris Ferguson, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Arctic and Global Resiliences said Chinese leaders have *"been trying to insert themselves into the Arctic."* *"So, we're being very mindful about their activity and in wanting to ensure that our interests are protected in the region,"* Ferguson said.

In late January, the Chinese spy balloon, rigged with high-tech sensors, first penetrated U.S. airspace over Alaska's Aleutian Islands, an 1,100-mile archipelago. The incident seized public attention as it drifted across the continent and maneuvered over sensitive military sites before being shot down off the coast of South Carolina. The long-range radar installations that ring the state, once focused mainly on Russian warplanes, are now calibrated to detect spy balloons from China.

During a recent visit to Alaska, Hicks was asked about potential incidents of Chinese spying. She did not acknowledge them, instead focusing on efforts in general to keep bases secure.

"We take the safety and security of our people in our installations very seriously," said Hicks, the deputy defense secretary. *"We always live with the possibility of intrusion on our installations, and so we work very hard to make sure, working alongside state and local authorities and others, that those bases and installations are protected from threats. We take a lot of measures to do that. And we're going to make sure we can continue to protect our installation so our folks can perform their missions."*

In recent years, there have been other intrusions at military bases in the Lower 48 states.

In 2019, a federal judge sentenced a Chinese student to a year in prison for illegally taking photos at Naval Air Station Key West in Florida. His lawyer said Zhao Qianli, 20, was just a tourist who had gotten lost, according to The Associated Press. But the naval base, where F-35 pilots train, is not a tourist hotspot. It is clearly marked off limits, and Zhao's camera and cellphone had only photos from the air station.