

US agencies drum up allegations of Chinese hacking of vaccine research

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The Trump administration is preparing to open another front in its propaganda war against China over the COVID-19 pandemic. The *New York Times* prominently reported on Monday that the FBI and Department of Homeland Security are expected to release an alert this week accusing China of attempting to steal information related to coronavirus vaccines and treatments from US corporations and institutions.

At a subsequent press conference, Trump all but confirmed the reports, declaring: “What else is new with China? I’m not happy with China, could have stopped it at the source, should have. Now you’re telling me they’re hacking. What else is new?” He then made clear that “we’re watching very closely.”

None of the media reports contain any evidence substantiating the allegations, but nevertheless treat the claims uncritically as fact. Moreover, it is unlikely that the official alert, if and when it is released, will contain more than bald, unsubstantiated allegations.

According to the *New York Times*, a draft of the forthcoming public warning declared that China is seeking “valuable intellectual property and public health data through illicit means related to vaccines, treatments and testing.” Its focus is not on Chinese intelligence agencies, but on “nontraditional actors,” that is, researchers and students who the Trump administration claims are being activated to hack American academic and private laboratories.

Last week British and US Cybersecurity officials issued a joint alert that pharmaceutical companies, universities and other organizations involved in medical research were being targeted by nation-state hackers in relation to the pandemic. It did not name any specific country.

The *New York Times* confirmed that the accusations against China, according to US former and current

officials, were “part of a broader deterrent strategy that also involves United States Cyber Command and the National Security Agency.”

American cyber-agencies are not only involved in monitoring and countering hacking, but are engaged in aggressive cyber warfare of their own. “Under legal authorities that President Trump issued nearly two years ago, they have the power to bore deeply into Chinese and other networks to mount proportional counterattacks,” the *New York Times* stated.

The article cited Christopher Krebs, the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, who claimed that China had a long history of “bad behavior in cyberspace, so it shouldn’t surprise anyone they are going after the critical organizations involved in the nation’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic.” He then made clear that his agency would “defend our interests aggressively.”

In response to the US media reports, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Beijing opposed all forms of cyber attack. “China is leading in the research of Covid-19 vaccine and treatment. It is immoral for anyone to engage in rumor-mongering without presenting any evidence,” he declared.

The latest accusations against China are part of the Trump administration’s aggressive efforts to blame Beijing for the global coronavirus pandemic. This is both to divert attention from its own criminally negligent response to the outbreak, and as part of ongoing US efforts to undermine China diplomatically and economically, and to prepare for war.

The US media and political establishment has repeatedly accused China of covering up the dangers posed by the COVID-19 outbreak despite the fact that Chinese authorities provided timely updates to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and US Centres for

Disease Control as they grappled to understand and control the new disease.

The responsibility for failing to take action for weeks to control the outbreak in the United States that has claimed tens of thousands of lives rests entirely with the Trump administration. Now, despite warnings from health scientists, Trump is pushing for a return to work in unsafe conditions that will endanger many more lives so as to shore up corporate profits.

Trump administration officials have also repeated that big lie originating in American far-right and fascistic circles that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese virology laboratory in Wuhan and either escaped or was released deliberately. Trump has even likened the pandemic to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 that led to the declaration of war in the Pacific.

In league with the Australian government, the Trump administration is pressing for an international investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 virus, which is nothing more than a threadbare cover for the manufacture of “evidence” to further heap blame on China. The call for the inquiry recalls the demands that Iraq open its doors to weapons inspectors prior to the illegal US-led invasion in 2003. The inspectors found nothing but that did not stop Washington repeating its lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

The Trump administration is reportedly preparing retaliatory measures against China for its alleged failings over the coronavirus pandemic. Yesterday rightwing Republican senator Lindsey Graham introduced legislation into the US Congress that would enable the president to impose a range of punitive sanctions against China, including asset freezes, travel bans, restrictions on loans to Chinese businesses and banning Chinese companies from listing in the US.

In introducing his “COVID-19 Accountability Act,” Graham absurdly declared that the coronavirus would not have entered the US had it not been for China’s “deception.” His legislation would require the president to certify that Beijing was cooperating with an international investigation, and, if not, to take retaliatory action.

The latest allegations of Chinese hacking of vaccine research are not only part of the Trump administration’s propaganda war but will be used to justify US cyber warfare measures against China. It is clear that the US, along with many other countries, is

already engaged in its own cyber espionage.

Justin Fier, a former national security intelligence analyst, told the *New York Times*: “This is a global pandemic, but unfortunately countries are not treating it as a global problem. Everyone is conducting widespread intelligence gathering—on pharmaceutical research, PPE [personal protective equipment] orders, response—to see who is making progress.” Fier noted that the frequency of cyber attacks and the spectrum of targets are “astronomical, off the charts.”

The US is not only accusing China of cyber espionage, but seeking to block research cooperation. In January, the US Justice Department announced charges against Charles Lieber, chairman of Harvard’s department of chemistry and chemical biology, over his participation in a Chinese program to recruit scientists.

The latest hacking allegations will undoubtedly cast a pall over Harvard’s joint study program with a Chinese institute on coronavirus treatments and vaccines, and similar programs, under conditions where global cooperation is vitally necessary to establish a means to contain the pandemic and save lives.



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