



GRYPHON GROWL



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INDOPACOM

AP: CHINA'S ECONOMY GREW 5.3% IN THE FIRST QUARTER, BEATING EXPECTATIONS

The world's second-largest economy expanded at a 5.3% annual pace in January-March, beating analysts' forecasts of about 4.8%, data released Tuesday [16 April] showed. Compared to the previous quarter, the economy grew 1.6%.

China's economy has struggled to bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic but gained momentum late last year as government policies to help the housing market and boost investment took effect.

However, Tuesday's better-than-expected data came days after China reported its exports sank 7.5% in March compared to the year before, while imports also weakened. Inflation cooled, reflecting deflationary pressures resulting from slack demand amid a crisis in the property sector.

"The investment and sales of real estate in the first quarter are indeed not very optimistic. The real estate market is still in a process of adjustment," Sheng Laiyun, deputy commissioner of the National Bureau of Statistics, told reporters in Beijing. Sheng also acknowledged that while growth was stronger than anticipated, it was uneven.

"Looking at the degree of recovery, we have found that the recovery of consumption is not as good as production, and the recovery of small and medium-sized enterprises is not as good as that of large enterprises, so there is a clear imbalance in the economic recovery," Sheng said.

BLOOMBERG: CHINA TELLS IRAN COOPERATION WILL LAST AFTER ATTACK ON ISRAEL

China's top diplomat told Iran that the nations can work together across a range of areas in the future, signaling their ties remain solid following Tehran's unprecedented attack on Israel.

"China is ready to steadily advance practical cooperation in various fields with Iran and promote greater development of China-Iran relations," Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian in a phone call on Monday [15 April].

Wang also said China noted Iran's position that its military action was "limited", and the country was "exercising its right of self-defense," according to a statement from the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. Wang's comments offer Iran a measure of diplomatic support after its missile and drone attack on Israel sparked worries of a broader conflict. Tehran said the move was retaliation for an attack on its embassy compound in Syria that killed top Iranian military officers. This was the first time Iran has struck Israel from its soil.



Wang didn't say what type of cooperation China was ready to advance with Iran but Beijing has made similar pledges in the past.

NEWSWEEK: CHINA INTERCEPTS US ALLY'S SHIPS NEAR DISPUTED WATERS

China's Coast Guard intercepted and shadowed Philippine government vessels over the weekend in an effort to block them from operating within the U.S. ally's internationally recognized maritime zone. The interaction culminated in an hours-long staredown just about 40 miles from a major Philippine island—much closer than has been typical for Chinese Coast Guard actions.

On Saturday [13 April], Philippine research vessel BRP Hydrographer Ventura and its Coast Guard escort BRP Gabriela Silang set off to conduct a hydrographic survey in waters north of contested Scarborough Shoal, a rich fishing grounds 120 nautical miles west of the Philippines' most populous island Luzon and 600 nautical miles from the closest Chinese shores.

Prior to the mission, a Philippines conservation agency had put out a notice announcing where it would take place and warning vessels to "take necessary precautionary measures at all times" when passing through the area.

Ship-tracking data published by Stanford University-affiliated research group SeaLight shows the ships were intercepted by a China Coast Guard ship just 35 nautical miles off the coast of Luzon, home to the Philippines' coastal capital Manila.

Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson Jay Tarriela wrote in a statement on social media that the ship's actions are proof China is "unhesitant in deploying its vessels within [the Philippines'] exclusive economic zone to intimidate and impede [its] legitimate operations, specifically in the field of marine scientific research."

The Philippine mission got underway amid what Powell called a "swarm" of at least 25 Chinese ships near Scarborough Shoal. The "swarm" included both China Coast Guard and paramilitary maritime militia vessels in numbers four times that seen at the reef in February.

EUCOM

ISW: RUSSIA & UKRAINE UPDATE

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized that continued shortages in air defense systems and artillery are preventing Ukraine from effectively defending itself against Russian strikes and ground assaults. Zelensky stated in an interview with PBS News Hour, which aired on April 15, that Ukrainian forces continue to lack enough air defense systems to protect Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces were only able to destroy the first seven of the 11 Russian missiles launched against the Trypilska Thermal Power Plant (TPP) on April 11 before running out of air defense missiles, allowing the remaining four missiles to destroy the plant. Zelensky reported that Ukrainian forces currently suffer from a 1-to-10 artillery shell disadvantage and that this artillery ammunition disadvantage allows Russian forces to push Ukrainian forces back each day.

Zelensky signed a new mobilization law on April 16, codifying a difficult but critical decision in Ukraine's efforts to stabilize its force generation apparatus and adequately prepare the Ukrainian fighting force both defensively and offensively. The new mobilization law, which the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted on April 11, lowers the Ukrainian draft age from 27 to 25 years of age, cancels the status of "limited suitability" for military service, and requires citizens living abroad to register for military service in Ukraine.

Russian forces in eastern Ukraine are using smaller groups to conduct assaults and are reportedly suffering from morale issues, but Russian attacks are unlikely to culminate in the near term despite these challenges because of Ukrainian materiel shortages. Spokesperson of the Ukrainian National Guard Colonel Ruslan Muzychuk stated that Russian forces in eastern Ukraine have not recently used large units to conduct assaults but are instead using groups split into two detachments reinforced with armored vehicles to conduct ground attacks.

Russian forces continue to adapt their drone tactics along the frontline as part of an offense-defense arms race to mitigate Ukrainian technological adaptations designed to offset Russian materiel advantages along the frontline. Ukrainian drone operators told the Washington Post in an article published on April 14 that the number of drones that both Russian and Ukrainian forces use has made the battlefield "almost transparent," but that Russian forces have significantly increased electronic warfare (EW) jamming since fall 2023. The Ukrainian drone operators stated that it can be difficult to distinguish between Ukrainian and Russian drones because about 100 Russian and Ukrainian reconnaissance and attack drones can operate simultaneously within a 10-kilometer radius.

BUSINESS INSIDER: CHILLING VIDEO SHOWS FIRE ERUPTING OUT OF A RUSSIAN TANK AFTER AN EXPLODING UKRAINIAN DRONE FLEW INTO ITS OPEN HATCH

A new chilling video shows a Ukrainian drone flying directly into the open command hatch of one Russia's main battle tanks before exploding and, apparently, setting off the ammo inside.

It's the latest example of how operators on both sides are flying unmanned aerial vehicles with astonishing precision and lethality, destroying everything from individual soldiers to expensive, high-value targets like top tanks.

The video was originally posted on Telegram on April 11 by the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and, later, shared on X. In it, Ukrainian first-person view drones conduct several successful strikes on Russian and vehicles, including what experts identified as a Russian T-90M tank, a weapon Putin has called "the world's best tank."



"FPV drone operators of the 8th Separate Regiment of the SSO inflicted significant losses on the enemy in the Donetsk direction," the Ukraine's Special Operations Forces said on Telegram.

These kinds of high-precision kills are not new for Ukraine. Back in November 2023, a Ukrainian service member from the UAV unit known as the Magyar Birds with the 59th Motorized Brigade shared footage of a number of exploding FPV drones flying into the open hatches of Russian vehicles.

Drone operators have become invaluable assets for both sides of the war, as well as prime targets. In some cases, operators have been documented using their drones to target each other, hoping to take out their enemy's capabilities for flying the UAVs that have dramatically complicated battlefield maneuver and combat operations.

ALJAZEERA: SPAIN LEADS EUROPEAN PUSH TO RECOGNISE PALESTINE, RISKING ISRAEL'S WRATH

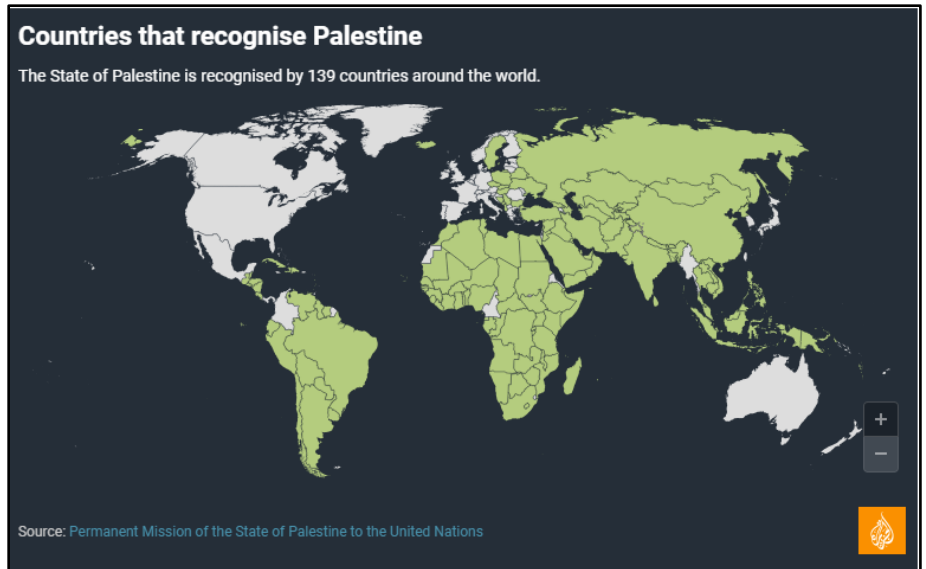
As Israel's war on Gaza rages on for a seventh month, with almost 34,000 Palestinians killed, Madrid wants to recognize Palestine as a state by July and is encouraging its neighbors to follow in its footsteps. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, a longtime supporter of Palestinian rights, sees recognition as a way of reaching a two-state solution and a possible key to ending the devastating conflict that began in October.

Sanchez, who has discussed the issue on his recent trips abroad, has declared that his country has agreed with Ireland, Malta, and Slovenia on the need for recognition. That four European governments are in favor of the move while others are against is a sign that the EU, as an institution, is deeply divided.

Other EU members will likely watch closely to

see whether the move has negative repercussions on ties with the US, Israel's top ally, or Israel itself. Analysts said even if Palestine is increasingly formally recognized, the reality of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land will limit the effect of the move.

If European nations were to apply serious pressure on Israel, it could happen in one of two ways, said Marc Martorell Junyent, a Munich-based journalist. The first would be by suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which is the legal basis of the bloc's trade ties with Israel. The second would be through halting arms sales to Israel.



AP: US VETOES WIDELY SUPPORTED RESOLUTION BACKING FULL UN MEMBERSHIP FOR PALESTINE

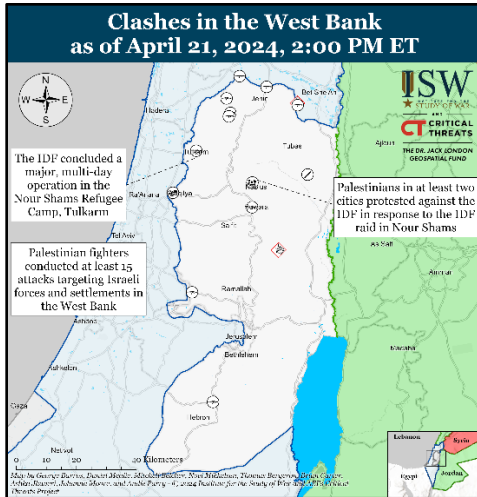
The United States vetoed a widely backed U.N. resolution Thursday [18 Apr] that would have paved the way for full United Nations membership for Palestine, a goal the Palestinians have long sought and Israel has worked to prevent. The vote in the 15-member Security Council was 12 in favor, the United States opposed and two abstentions, from the United Kingdom and Switzerland. U.S. allies France, Japan and South Korea supported the resolution.

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood told the Security Council that the veto "does not reflect opposition to Palestinian statehood but instead is an acknowledgment that it will only come from direct negotiations between the parties." In explaining the U.S. veto, Wood said there are "unresolved questions" on whether Palestine meets the criteria to be considered a state. He pointed to Hamas still exerting power and influence in the Gaza Strip, which is a key part of the state envisioned by the Palestinians.

"The United States is committed to intensifying its engagement with the Palestinians and the rest of the region, not only to address the current crisis in Gaza, but to advance a political settlement that will create a path to Palestinian statehood and membership in the United Nations," he said.

CENTCOM

ISW: ISRAEL-HAMAS UPDATE



The IDF concluded a major, multi-day “counterterrorism operation” in the Nour Shams Refugee Camp, Tulkarm, on April 21. Israeli forces engaged Palestinian fighters in Nour Shams, killing 14 Palestinian fighters. The IDF Duvdevan unit arrested 15 wanted persons, destroyed two improvised explosive device manufacturing facilities and dozens of explosives, and seized ammunition during operations in the camp. Palestinian fighters wounded ten IDF soldiers in the operation.

Hamas, the Lions’ Den, the Palestinian Mujahideen Movement, and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades published statements calling for a mass uprising and armed retaliation against the IDF. Those Palestinian militias and others claimed 15 attacks on Israeli forces, Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and Israeli border towns on April 21. PIJ’s Jenin Battalion conducted nine of the 15 attacks. PIJ said that they were responding to the Israeli raid in Nour Shams. Palestinians also conducted unclaimed attacks targeting Israeli checkpoints near Hebron and in the Jordan Valley. The timing of these unclaimed attacks suggests that they are in response to the calls for mobilization. An unspecified group planted an improvised explosive

device near Ramallah on April 21. The fighters had connected the IED’s detonator to a Palestinian flag so that when an Israeli attempted to remove the flag, the IED detonated.

Supplementary ISW Update: The Washington Post reported on April 15 that 17 Iranian officials visited a Russian air defense system factory in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in March 2023. The factory produces S-400 air defense missiles and mobile launchers, among other military equipment. Unspecified intelligence officials told the Washington Post that Russia is “advancing” an agreement with Iran to supply Iran with Su-35 fighter jets. Iran has long sought, but not yet received, Su-35s in return for supplying Russia with drones. Russia previously provided Iran with at least two Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft in September 2023, which Iranian media framed as a “necessary prelude” for the acquisition of Su-35s.

Senior Iranian officials emphasized that Iran would strike Israel again “faster and stronger” if Israel retaliated to Iran’s April 13 missile and drone attack. Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani stated that Iran would respond against Israel within a “few seconds” of an Israeli attack. The spokesperson of Iran’s Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee claimed that Iran is “ready to use weapons that [it] has not used before” during an interview with Lebanese Hezbollah-controlled media on April 16.

CNBC: ISRAEL’S WAR CABINET IS LOCKED BETWEEN RESTRAINT AND REVENGE

A Monday [15 April] meeting of Israel’s five-person war Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, concluded without comment on whether the Jewish state will honor its pledge to “exact a price” from Tehran or concede to calls for a measured response from international leaders. The prolonged deliberation came after the Israeli military said that Iran on Saturday fired more than 300 drones and missiles at its soil. It claimed that it and international allies eliminated 99% of these attacks as part of its now-dubbed “Iron Shield” operation.

Tehran said its assault was in response to an Israeli strike that killed several top commanders at an Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, on April 1 — an offensive for which Israel has yet to claim responsibility. Iran said the Saturday hostilities have “concluded” its retaliation — and Israel is now left to consider next steps.

Concerns are mounting that the conflict — rooted in the Oct. 7 terror attack undertaken by Palestinian militant group Hamas and Israel’s retaliatory war campaign in the Gaza Strip — will seep into the broader Middle East region. Since October, Israel has traded fire with a spate of other Iran-supported factions, such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthis and Bashar Assad’s Syrian administration.

World leaders across Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East have widely called for calm, with Saudi Arabia — a now reconciled former foe of Iran — urging “the utmost levels of restraint.”



BBC: ISRAEL ATTACK: DAMAGE SEEN AT AIR BASE IN ISFAHAN

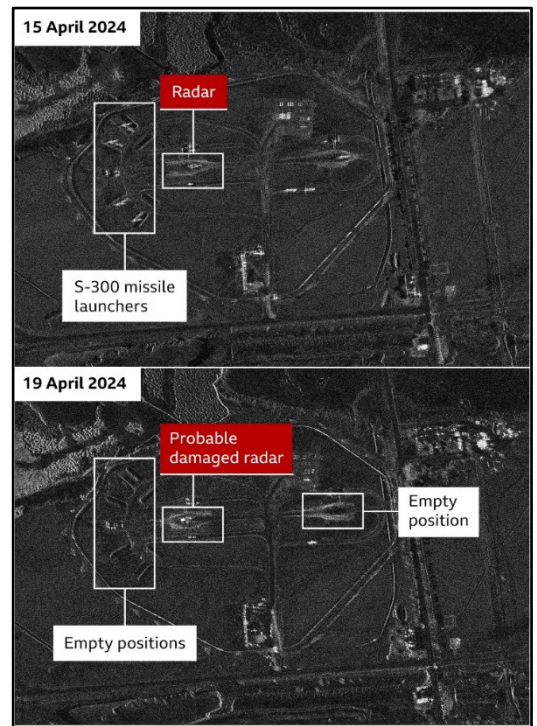
US officials say Israel carried out a missile strike although there has been no official Israeli confirmation. An earlier, suspected Israeli strike on an Iranian consulate in Syria at the beginning of the month was followed by a retaliatory attack by Iran on Israel on 13 April.

Ever since news of Friday's Israeli strike in Isfahan - the cradle of Iran's nuclear program - there has been speculation about the likely target and extent of the damage. Iran says the attack involved drones that were neutralized by air defenses.

BBC Verify made this assessment through analysis of optical and Synthetic Aperture Radar satellite imagery captured over Isfahan on Friday. One such image captured by Umbra Space on 15 April shows an S-300 air defense system located at the north-western corner of the Shikari air base. The system comprises several vehicles equipped with radar, distinctive missile launchers and other equipment.

An Umbra Space image captured after Friday's strike shows damage and debris around one component - probably a radar - which has also shifted position slightly. The military base itself does not show any signs of material damage in the available imagery, but further analysis of higher resolution optical captures will be required to make that conclusion.

As yet there is no available imagery from Isfahan's nuclear facilities. The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency has said there was "no damage to Iran's nuclear sites".



SOUTHCOM

BREAKING DEFENSE: ARGENTINA SIGNS \$300M CONTRACT FOR 24 DANISH F-16 FIGHTER JETS

Argentina closed on a \$300 million contract with Denmark for 24 second hand Royal Danish Air Force F-16 fighter jets Tuesday during a signing ceremony at Skrydstrup Air Base in Denmark. "I am very pleased that the Danish F-16 aircraft, which have served us well over the years and have been thoroughly maintained and technologically updated, [will] now be used in the Argentine Air Force," said Lund Poulsen. "With the deal, we are strengthening Danish-Argentinian defense cooperation, while Argentina will become part of the global F-16 family."

By dismissing a rival offer for the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC)/Chengdu Aircraft Corporation (CAC) JF-17 Thunder fighter, Argentina has sided against cooperation with China, a prospect the US had strongly opposed. Buenos Aires also declined Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) Tejas jets pitched by India.

Danish F-16s are set to be replaced by 27 Lockheed Martin F-35A fifth generation fighter jets, the first four of which were delivered to Skrydstrup Air Base in October 2023. The manufacturer said at the time that a further six Danish aircraft were based at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.



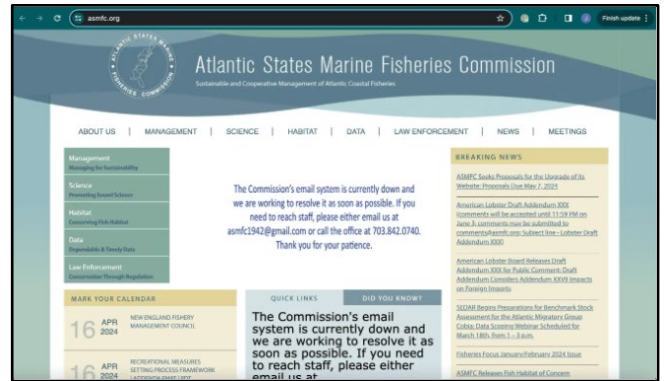
Additional deliveries planned for the first half of 2024 have been delayed to the second half of the year, because of Technology Refresh 3 (TR-3) development and testing software upgrade difficulties faced by Lockheed Martin, according to the Danish Ministry of Defense.

Denmark is also committed to supplying Ukraine with 19 F-16 jets, the first of which will be delivered this summer. A further 26 aircraft have been promised by European nations.

CYBER

THE RECORD: ATLANTIC FISHERIES BODY CONFIRMS CYBER INCIDENT AFTER 8BASE RANSOMWARE GANG CLAIMS BREACH

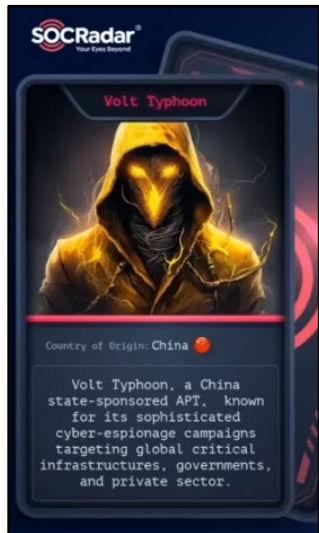
The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) — an 80-year-old organization created by Congress and made up of officials from the Atlantic coast states — said this week that its email system is down. Tina Berger, director of communications for ASMFC, told Recorded Future News that they are currently “responding to a cyber incident affecting our systems” but did not respond to further questions about whether they are dealing with a ransomware attack.



On Monday [15 April], the 8Base ransomware gang added the organization to its leak site, giving officials four days to pay an undisclosed ransom. The group claimed it stole invoices, personal data, contracts and more. A similar U.S. government commission tasked with managing the lake and river systems along the border between the U.S. and Canada was attacked by another ransomware gang in September.

Researchers from VMware said last year that while the group was new, its speed and efficiency “do not indicate the start of a new group but rather signify the continuation of a well-established mature organization.” VMware found deep ties between 8Base and RansomHouse — a platform cybercriminals use to sell stolen data and extort victims. The researchers also found similarities between 8Base and the Phobos ransomware.

REUTERS / THE HILL / THE NEW YORK TIMES: FBI & NSA SAY CHINESE HACKERS PREPARING TO ATTACK US INFRASTRUCTURE



At the 2024 Vanderbilt University Summit on Modern Conflict and Emerging Threats, FBI Director Christopher Wray said on Thursday that, “Chinese government-linked hackers have burrowed into U.S. critical infrastructure and are waiting for just the right moment to deal a devastating blow. An ongoing Chinese hacking campaign known as Volt Typhoon has successfully gained access to numerous American companies in telecommunications, energy, water, and other critical sectors, with 23 pipeline operators targeted.” Wray said in a speech.

The FBI Director’s comments came on the heels of a statement made a day earlier at the same conference by General Timothy D. Haugh, the Chief of the NSA and head of the U.S. Military’s Cyber Command. “China has been trying to find ways to gain access to critical infrastructure in the United States so that it can threaten those systems in the event of a conflict. Beijing has stepped up its cyber efforts and that the United States, in response, was working harder to disrupt that activity.”

China is developing the “ability to physically wreak havoc on our critical infrastructure at a time of its choosing,” Wray stated. “Its plan is to land low blows against civilian infrastructure to try to induce panic.” Wray said it was difficult to determine the intent of this cyber pre-positioning which was aligned with China’s broader intent to deter the U.S. from defending Taiwan.

“What you see in Volt Typhoon is an example of how China has approached establishing access to put things under threat,” General Haugh said. “There is not a valid intelligence reason to be looking at a water treatment plant from a cyber perspective.” General Haugh said China was securing access to critical networks ahead of a direct confrontation between the two countries. While he did not say specifically what that could involve, other American officials have said that if China gained access to critical infrastructure near military bases, it could disrupt or shut down systems to sow chaos and slow response time to a crisis in the Pacific or over Taiwan.

General Haugh described it as an unfair fight. The United States had to disrupt Chinese systems inside a closed and restrictive environment. The Chinese, on the other hand, get to operate in the United States, an open society where it is far easier to get access to targets. “China is pursuing deliberate campaigns to gain advantage in every aspect of national power,” General Haugh said. “The threat posed by China is real — the P.R.C. has the desire and ability that make themselves our peer on the world stage.”



Earlier this week, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said Volt Typhoon was in fact unrelated to China's government but is part of a criminal ransomware group. In a statement, China's Embassy in Washington referred back to the MFA spokesperson's comment. "Some in the US have been using origin-tracing of cyberattacks as a tool to hit and frame China, claiming the US to be the victim while it's the other way round, and politicizing cybersecurity issues."

Wray said China's hackers operated a series of botnets - constellations of compromised personal computers and servers around the globe - to conceal their malicious cyber activities. Private sector American technology and cybersecurity companies previously attributed Volt Typhoon to China, including reports by security researchers with Microsoft and Google.

Nearly a year ago, Microsoft [released a report](#) that showed Volt Typhoon had been accessing credentials and network systems of critical infrastructure organizations in the U.S. Volt Typhoon has been active since mid-2021 and has targeted communications, manufacturing, utility, transportation, construction, maritime, government, information technology and education sectors. Microsoft said the group's goal is to spy on organizations and gain access to their networks "without being detected for as long as possible."