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China Spy Bases: Rumors, Speculation and Bad Analysis



Photo by [Yohan Marion](#)

From Havana Syndrome to Russian warships, major media outlets in recent years have sparked and fanned the flames of hysteria when it comes to Cuba.

The latest boogeyman: “China spy bases.”

There is no evidence any such base exists on the island.

But who needs evidence when you have anonymous U.S. officials?

The Journal “Breaks” the China Spy Base Story

In June 2023, D.C.-based journalists Warren P. Strobel and Gordon Lubold authored a front-page story in the Wall Street Journal with the headline: “China Plans Spy Base in Cuba.”

The article stated that Cuba and China had “reached a secret agreement” for China to set up an eavesdropping facility on the island in exchange for several billion dollars. The reporters cited the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and stated that the spy base would “represent an unprecedented new threat” to the United States.

Their only apparent sources were anonymous “U.S. officials.”

The Cuban embassy in Washington called the story “mendacious.”

A spokesperson for China’s Foreign Ministry denied knowledge of the bases, [calling the U.S. government](#) “an expert on chasing shadows and meddling in other countries’ internal affairs.”

The White House said the WSJ article was “inaccurate.”

Two days later, after a flurry of media coverage and [bipartisan outrage](#) on Capitol Hill, White House officials speaking on background (meaning they could not be cited by name) told reporters that China had already been operating “intelligence collection facilities” in Cuba for years.

No evidence was provided outside of vague statements from these unnamed officials. That did not stop “China Spy Base in Cuba” from becoming major headlines.

Intelligence is by its nature secret, so it’s not surprising that sources insist on anonymity and hard evidence is difficult to come by. But when a journalist bases their reporting entirely off statements of unnamed officials, a healthy dose of skepticism is in order.

The Society of Professional Journalists’ Ethics Committee [urges journalists](#) to identify sources whenever feasible and to always question the motives of anonymous sources. It’s not clear the Wall Street Journal and other media outlets who have run with the story have done either.

Not a New Story

Alarmist, evidence-free reporting on China spy bases in Cuba is nothing new.

In 2000, El Nuevo Herald [reported](#) (without providing any sources) that China had “an important listening station base” in the small town of Bejucal, Cuba, and two years later [published a piece](#) asserting that China had built spy bases in Cuba in two other locations (also without sources).

While debating Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican Primary, Sen. Marco Rubio [called on Cuba](#) to kick out the “Chinese listening station” in Bejucal, Cuba. Rubio provided no evidence such a listening station existed – nor did CNN moderator Jake Tapper ask him for it.

Google has also joined in, pointing its finger at another U.S. adversary. A military installation in Bejucal is referred to as “China and Russia Intelligence Base” on Google Maps. Not even the Wall Street Journal’s anonymous sources claim that Russia is a co-conspirator in operating “spy bases” in Cuba.

Rumors and Speculation

The latest iteration of the “China spy base” story was revived last month when the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a prominent D.C. think tank, [released a report](#) entitled “Secret Signals: Decoding China’s Intelligence Activities in Cuba.” The report was created by CSIS’s [Hidden Reach](#) program, which focuses on revealing China’s influence around the world.

CSIS’s media relations team did not respond to requests for interviews with the report’s authors.

The CSIS report used satellite imagery to identify four locations “where China is most likely operating” its alleged spy bases. It provided no evidence – not even from unnamed officials – that China is operating spy bases in Cuba.

“That’s bad analysis,” said Fulton Armstrong, a former CIA analyst who also served as the nation’s top intelligence officer on Latin America. “The report pulls the rumors and speculation in only one direction – to support its preordained conclusion that Chinese intelligence capabilities are expanding in ways threatening to U.S. interests, with Cuba’s full support.”

The CSIS report identified four locations – three near Havana and one near Santiago de Cuba, the island’s second largest city – that “could” be used by China to conduct signals intelligence (SIGINT).

According to the report, images of the location near Santiago de Cuba showed the recent construction of a circularly disposed antenna array (CDAA), which it explained are “highly effective at determining the origin and direction of incoming high-frequency signals.”

This sounds impressive except for the fact that CDAAAs [have become largely obsolete](#). The report itself acknowledges that Russia and the United States have abandoned most of their CDAAAs.

“The report looks at old Cold War technology and makes it seem like it’s cutting edge,” said Armstrong. “Nowadays SIGINT is not that dependent on geography. It’s all about fiber optics and satellites. You don’t need these great big antenna farms.”

On The Ground in Cuba

Belly of the Beast journalists tried to go to the three sites near Havana identified in the CSIS report, in the towns of Wajay, Bejucal and Calabazar.

All three appear to be facilities run by the Cuban military or Interior Ministry.

Wajay is on the outskirts of Havana less than two miles from José Martí International Airport.

The facility there is surrounded by residential neighborhoods and its antennas are in plain view from adjacent public streets.

The CSIS report claimed that “security fencing and two guard posts strongly suggests that the site is intended for military or other sensitive activities.”

When our journalists visited the site in Wajay, the guard posts appeared abandoned. Part of the facility’s perimeter was lined with a rusty fence. Another part was bordered by trees.

At the main entrance, the security guard was an elderly woman who was an unarmed civilian employed by Cuba’s Vigilance and Protection Corps (CVP), a state agency that provides security services at schools, hospitals, stores and hotels.

One neighbor said that the facility had once been robbed.

Nearby at Calabazar, antennas draped in ivy and a dirt-covered satellite dish could be seen from the street.

“That’s laughably old technology,” said Armstrong after viewing video footage of the Wajay and Calabazar facilities. “It’s sort of an insult to the Chinese if you’re going to say that this is the future of their intel collection against the United States.”

A no trespassing sign blocked access to the Bejucal facility. Locals said the base had existed for years and was Cuban, not Chinese or Russian.

A Pretext to Tighten the Screws on Cuba

Could any of these facilities in fact be a China spy base?

“Impossible,” said Carlos Alzugaray, a retired Cuban diplomat who lives in Havana. “The only foreign military installation that exists in Cuba is American: the Guantanamo Naval Base.”

The facilities near Havana identified in the CSIS report are Cuban and have been there for years, according to Hal Klepak, an expert on the Cuban military who was an advisor to the foreign and defense ministers of Canada.

“There is not the slightest evidence that China has paid, or is planning to pay, Cuba billions of dollars for anything, much less spy facilities which would be only very marginally useful and would set off unwelcome alarm bells in the U.S.,” said Klepak. “None of my sources on the island have suggested there is minor new construction at any of these installations, much less major.”

“This is obvious fake news,” said Alzugaray. “They want to show aggressive intent so they can tighten the screws against Cuba. This is obviously what these right-wing people are doing, trying to magnify the supposed Cuban threat.”

It would not be the first time unsubstantiated rumors and media hysteria were used by the U.S. government to justify a hard-line policy against Cuba.

In 2017, alleged “sonic attacks” on U.S. spies and diplomats in Havana, [reported on](#) uncritically and inaccurately by major media outlets, were used by the Trump administration to shut down the U.S. embassy and intensify sanctions against Cuba. As it turns out, audio recordings made by U.S. officials to document the “attacks” revealed that the sounds were made [by short-tailed crickets](#).

Since then, media outlets have suggested that U.S. officials were “attacked” by microwave – not sonic – weapons.

No evidence has been presented to corroborate the existence of a microwave weapon capable of causing the symptoms reported by U.S. officials. Multiple U.S. intelligence agencies also [found](#) no evidence of an “attack” by a foreign adversary. A National Institute of Health study [showed](#) that none of the U.S. embassy personnel who reported symptoms suffered from brain or physical injuries.

“At some point it’s fair to look at the motivation of the people who are doing all of the hyperventilation about these supposed spy bases,” said Armstrong. “Is there a real threat here? Or is it really an opportunity for certain people to build another case against Cuba, another case against China, to build up these very aggressive policies that we have in place against these two countries, instead of engaging, for example, as we did with Cuba in the normalization that began under President Obama.”

Mudslingers Control the Narrative

So what could be happening at the four locations identified in the CSIS report?

According to Armstrong, there are multiple plausible explanations that have nothing to do with China spying on the United States, such as accessing satellite networks, tracking space missions, operating telecommunications inside Cuba and running radars to help catch drug traffickers.

“It probably also makes sense that when [Cuba] wants to buy technology that it cannot produce itself, it would buy technology from China,” he said. “China produces a lot of affordable electronic technology, but that’s far different from saying that China is running SIGINT bases out of Cuba.”

If Cuba is running SIGINT operations from its own territory, this would be routine and unsurprising, according to Armstrong.

“You can’t really fault Cuba for collecting signals intelligence for their own national security purposes given that we have posed a threat to Cuban national security for many, many years,” he said.

The challenge in questioning unsubstantiated claims is that it’s all but impossible to prove something doesn’t exist.

“You can’t prove a negative, so mudslingers control the narrative,” said Armstrong.

Tempest in a Teapot

Perhaps the more important question is: If China is gathering intelligence from Cuba, does it even matter?

“It’s a tempest in a teapot,” said Peter Kornbluh, director of the Cuba Documentation Project at the D.C.-based National Security Archives. “If China is using Cuba as a location to spy on the U.S., it does not represent a serious threat.”

Nearly every government in the world uses its diplomatic missions as “listening posts” to seek information on their host states or nearby states, according to Klepak.

“Even if China is doing some intelligence gathering in Cuba, just as it does in every other part of the world, including in its diplomatic posts in the United States, this would neither be surprising nor necessarily threatening,” he said.

Klepak said that the Wall Street Journal’s warning of “an unprecedented new threat” is “absurd beyond words.”

“The [U.S.] Department of Defense has been consistent for at least 29 years in saying Cuba poses no security threat,” he said. “There are real threats out there and China using some facilities in Cuba to gain access to intelligence from the United States would not be one of them.”

Reed Lindsay is a journalist with [Belly of the Beast](#), an award-winning U.S.-based media outlet that covers Cuba and U.S.-Cuba relations.

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