

# FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE ENTITIES' RECRUITMENT PLANS TARGET CLEARED ACADEMIA

**DEFENSE COUNTERINTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY AGENCY**

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## SUMMARY

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Foreign Intelligence entities (FIE)<sup>i</sup>, specifically China and Russia, use academic talent recruitment plans and academic excellence initiatives to collect U.S. scientific research and technologies in a strategic effort to enhance their militaries and economies. China and Russia often utilize foreign students accepted to U.S. universities or at postgraduate research programs to collect sensitive U.S. Government information and/or technology. Additionally, Iran uses government-sponsored initiatives to persuade students studying abroad to return and share their knowledge. FIE target U.S. subject matter experts (SMEs), professors, and researchers in order to obtain sensitive U.S. Government information and technology.

## NARRATIVE

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### TALENT RECRUITMENT AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

While foreign government-sponsored talent recruitment plans and academic excellence initiatives promote international cooperation in science and technology research, these programs are often part of a broader whole-of-government strategy to obtain U.S. scientific-funded research and/or technology through government-run or government-funded programs. FIE use talent recruitment plans and academic excellence initiatives to collect U.S. Government information and technology for military and economic gain from cleared academia. The Chinese talent recruitment plan is the Thousand Talents Plan (TTP), while Russia employs Project 5-100 and Mega Grants academic excellence initiatives. Additionally, the Iranian government encourages students to study abroad and bring knowledge back to Iran.<sup>1,2</sup>

- China's goal is to be the Science and Technology (S&T) Global Leader by 2050.<sup>3,4</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses talent-recruitment programs to gain technology from abroad to achieve that goal. China is executing a global campaign to recruit S&T experts and foreign talent for economic development and military modernization. These experts provide access to knowledge and sensitive U.S. information and technology. While the Chinese government manages more than 200 talent recruitment plans, the TTP is most prominent. The central government of China established TTP in 2008 to recognize and recruit leading international experts in scientific research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.<sup>5,6,7</sup> China's Ministry of Science and Technology launched the National High-end Foreign Experts Recruitment Plan in 2019 as a TTP rebranding effort, though the program is still largely referred to as TTP.<sup>8,9</sup>
- Project 5-100 is a Russian government-run academic excellence 8-year initiative, launched by Presidential Decree on May 7, 2012 and led by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education Russian Federation. The aim of Project 5-100 is to strengthen Russia's position as an outstanding place for education and research and to improve its international competitiveness by getting at least five Russian universities into the top 100 best universities in the world.<sup>10,11,12</sup> During 2017, the funding for the 5-100 Project that came from the federal budget accounted for 2.02 percent of a total 510.9 billion rubles (approximately 6.7 billion USD in March 2021) that had been channeled to higher education institutions in Russia.<sup>13</sup> Eight years later, none of these universities made it into the top 100.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> **Foreign Intelligence Entity (FIE):** Any known or suspected foreign organization, person, or group (public, private, or governmental) that conducts intelligence activities to acquire U.S. information, block or impair U.S. intelligence collection, influence U.S. policy, or disrupt U.S. systems and programs.



- During the early 1990s, Russia had a major exodus of scientists due to nominal state-funded support for science. The Russian government designed the Mega Grants scheme to attract back some of the most successful Russian expatriate scientists, at least enabling them to take up adjunct positions in Russia while continuing to run labs in the West.<sup>15</sup> Mega Grants are distributed in an amount up to 90 million rubles (about 1.19 million USD in March 2021), for each research team conducting scientific exploration over a 3-year period. Scientific research projects must be tailored to Russian goals and developmental priorities, as outlined in Russia's Strategy of Scientific and Technological Development and are carried out "on measures to attract leading Russian and foreign scientists at Russian institutions or higher education."<sup>16,17</sup> The program gives all rights of the research findings to the Russian university that hosts the grant recipient, meaning the leading researcher cannot sell the results of his research and Russia owns all discoveries and all profits would likely go to the host university, leaving out the researcher who made the discovery.<sup>18</sup>
- Over the past few decades Iran has experienced the loss of tens of thousands Iranian experts and researchers to Europe and North America in search of jobs and better salaries.<sup>19,20,21</sup> The Iranian government founded the National Elites Foundation (INEF) in May 2005 after approval by the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council. Its main purpose is to recognize, organize and support Iran's elite talents in an effort to prevent "brain drain." INEF offers Iranian experts and researchers incentives to return to Iran. These incentives include resources and facilities for scientific and research activities, research grants, travel and accommodation allowances, and research opportunities within the Armed Forces in lieu of military service.<sup>22,23</sup> Additionally, the Iranian government promotes international education with the intent of returning students sharing that knowledge and innovation with Iran.<sup>24,25</sup>

## SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY

FIE often use foreign students accepted to U.S. universities or at postgraduate research programs to collect sensitive U.S. Government information and/or technology. This method of collection often starts with applications or résumé submissions for admission to advanced science, technology, engineering, and math degree programs associated with cleared academic institutions.

- Yanqing YE, is a lieutenant in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the armed forces of the People's Republic of China, and a member of the CCP. Additionally, she studied at the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT), a top military academy directed by the CCP in China. On her J-1<sup>ii</sup> Nonimmigrant Visa application, YE allegedly falsely identified herself as a "student" and lied about her ongoing military service at the NUDT. During YE's time in the United States on her J-1 Visa, she maintained close contact with her supervisor at the NUDT and other colleagues. While studying at (USPER 1) Boston University's Department of Physics, Chemistry and Biomedical Engineering from October 2017 to April 2019, YE allegedly continued to work as a PLA Lieutenant completing numerous assignments from PLA officers such as conducting research, assessing

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<sup>ii</sup> The J-1 Nonimmigrant Visa classification (exchange visitors) is authorized for those who intend to participate in an approved program for the purpose of teaching, instructing or lecturing, studying, observing, conducting research, consulting, demonstrating special skills, receiving training, or to receive graduate medical education or training. In carrying out the responsibilities of the Exchange Visitor Program, the Department of State designates public and private entities to act as exchange sponsors. J-1 nonimmigrants are therefore sponsored by an exchange program that is designated as such by the U.S. Department of State. These programs are designed to promote the interchange of persons, knowledge, and skills, in the fields of education, arts, and science (<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/exchange-visitors>).



United States military websites, and sending United States documents and information to China.<sup>26</sup>

- In August 2018, Zaosong ZHENG entered the United States on a J-1 Visa and conducted cancer-cell research at (USPER 2) Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston from September 4, 2018, to December 9, 2019. It is alleged that on December 9, 2019, ZHENG stole 21 vials of biological research and attempted to smuggle them out of the United States aboard a flight destined for China. Federal officers at Logan Airport discovered the vials hidden in a sock inside one of ZHENG's bags. ZHENG allegedly lied to officers about the contents of his luggage, but later admitted he had stolen the vials from a lab at Beth Israel. ZHENG stated that he intended to bring the vials to China to continue research and independently publish the results.<sup>27</sup>
- Maria BUTINA, a Russian foreign agent, was arrested July 15, 2018 and charged with acting in the United States as an agent of the Russian Federation. A year prior to her arrest BUTINA was a graduate student at (USPER 3) American University working on a sensitive project involving cybersecurity. BUTINA's college assignment called for her to gather information on the cyber defenses of U.S. nonprofit organizations that champion media freedom and human rights. It was information that could help plug important vulnerabilities, but also would be of interest to the Russian government. Prosecutors allege in court documents that attending the university was BUTINA's "cover" as she cultivated political contacts and ties with the (USPER 4) National Rifle Association. They contend she was part of a clandestine political influence campaign directed by a former Russian lawmaker who has been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for his alleged ties to Russian President Vladimir PUTIN.<sup>28</sup>
- In 2010, Lidia GURYEVA and nine other sleeper agents without diplomatic cover, plead guilty to conspiring to act as foreign agents and were swapped back to Russia for prisoners held by Russia. Of the 10 captured, seven went to U.S. universities. One taught politics for a semester at (USPER 5) Baruch College, criticizing American foreign policy.<sup>29</sup>
- Evgeny BURYAKOV, who arrived in the United States in 2010, was working as a Russian agent under nonofficial cover, collecting economic information for Russia's foreign intelligence service (SVR). He was arrested and charged with conspiracy to act and acting as an unregistered agent of a foreign government. Two other SVR agents, posing as official Russian representatives in New York, were forced to leave the country, their roles in the spy ring exposed in a detailed criminal complaint filed against BURYAKOV. Prosecutors said BURYAKOV met dozens of times in Manhattan and the Bronx with his Russian handlers, Igor SPORYSHEV, a Russian trade representative, and Victor PODOBNYY, an attaché at the Russian mission to the United States. SPORYSHEV and PODOBNYY operated out of a secure office in Manhattan where they talked freely, unaware that FBI counterintelligence agents were surveilling the facility, according to the complaint. The FBI said the SVR agents used the office to communicate with headquarters, Moscow Center, to transmit and receive intelligence reports, along with information BURYAKOV gleaned in "confidential talks" as a banker. Part of BURYAKOV's focus, according to the complaint, was information on U.S. sanctions and the development of alternative energy sources. The complaint reveals that the SVR agents tried to recruit people working for major companies and young women with ties to a New York University.<sup>30</sup>

FIE target U.S. SME professors, and researchers in order to obtain sensitive U.S. Government information and technology. Common recruitment practices include (but are not limited to) unsolicited job offers, invitations to attend or submit a paper for an international conference, social or professional networking





requests, research grants with amenities at foreign research labs, and requests for SMEs to review research papers, in hopes the SME will correct any mistakes.

- (USPER 6) Harvard University chemistry professor, since 2008, (USPER 7) Dr. Charles LIEBER, served as the principal investigator of the (USPER 8) Lieber Research Group at Harvard University, which specialized in the area of nanoscience, had received more than \$15 million in grant funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Department of Defense (DOD). These grants required the disclosure of significant foreign financial conflicts of interest, including financial support from foreign governments or foreign entities. Unbeknownst to Harvard University, beginning in 2011, LIEBER became a “Strategic Scientist” at Wuhan University of Technology (WUT) in China and was a contractual participant in China’s TTP from about 2012 through 2017. Under the terms of LIEBER’s 3-year TTP contract, WUT paid LIEBER \$50,000 USD per month, living expenses of up to 1,000,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately \$158,000 USD at the time) and awarded him more than \$1.5 million to establish a research lab at WUT. In return, LIEBER was obligated to work for WUT for no less than 9 months a year. His responsibilities included declaring international cooperation projects, cultivating young teachers and Ph.D. students, organizing international conferences, applying for patents, and publishing articles in the name of WUT.<sup>31</sup>
- In 2004, (USPER 9) University of Tennessee professor (USPER 10) John Reese ROTH was awarded a U.S. Air Force contract to develop plasma actuators to control the flight of small, subsonic, unmanned, military drone aircraft. During the course of that contract, he allowed both a Chinese national student as well as an Iranian national student to access export controlled data and equipment. ROTH also exported some of the data from the contract to China when he traveled to lecture at universities regarding his work.<sup>32,33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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China, Russia, and Iran have recognized their internal shortfalls in science and technological expertise in academia and industry. Having recognized these shortfalls, each country has instituted its own programs to reverse the trend which are generally known as talent recruitment programs and academic excellence initiatives. Recent history has demonstrated these countries in particular, are willing to violate international law, U.S. law, and threaten U.S. security practices to obtain the knowledge, information, and expertise they seek.

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