

US navy petty officer sentenced to two years in prison over spying for China



Wenheng Zhao, 26, pleaded guilty in October to passing sensitive military information to Chinese intelligence officer

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A US navy petty officer who pleaded guilty to providing sensitive military information to a Chinese intelligence officer was sentenced to more than two years in prison on Monday, the US justice department said.

Wenheng Zhao, 26, and another US sailor, Jinchao Wei, were arrested in August on suspicion of spying for [China](#).



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Zhao pleaded guilty in a federal court in [California](#) in October to charges of conspiring with a foreign intelligence officer and accepting a bribe. He was sentenced on Monday to 27 months in prison and a \$5,500 fine.

According to US officials, Zhao, who was stationed at a naval base north of Los Angeles, received nearly \$15,000 from the Chinese intelligence officer between August 2021 and May 2023.

In exchange, he handed over sensitive information regarding US navy operational security, exercises and critical infrastructure.

Zhao specifically provided information about a large-scale maritime training exercise in the Pacific and electrical diagrams and blueprints for a radar system located in Okinawa, Japan.

“Mr Zhao betrayed his solemn oath to defend his country and endangered those who serve in the [US military](#),” assistant attorney general Matthew Olsen said in a statement.

“The justice department is committed to combatting the Chinese government’s efforts to undermine our nation’s security and holding accountable those who violate our laws as part of those efforts.”

Wei, who served on the amphibious assault ship the USS Essex, is accused of handing over to China dozens of documents, photos and videos detailing the operation of ships and their systems.



Office of Public Affairs
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Navy Sailor Sentenced to 27 Months in Prison for Transmitting Sensitive U.S. Military Information to Chinese Intelligence

Monday, January 8, 2024

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Office of Public Affairs

A U.S. Navy service member was sentenced today to 27 months in prison and ordered to pay a \$5,500 fine for transmitting sensitive U.S. military information to an intelligence officer from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in exchange for bribery payments.

According to court documents, Petty Officer Wenheng Zhao, 26, aka Thomas Zhao, of Monterey Park, California, [pleaded guilty](#) in October 2023 to one count of conspiring with the intelligence officer and one count of receiving a bribe.

“Mr. Zhao betrayed his solemn oath to defend his country and endangered those who serve in the U.S. military,” said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “Today, he is being held to account for

those crimes. The Justice Department is committed to combatting the Chinese government's efforts to undermine our nation's security and holding accountable those who violate our laws as part of those efforts."

"Zhao betrayed his country and disgraced himself when he accepted bribes from an intelligence officer with the People's Republic of China," said U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada for the Central District of California. "As a result, he has now been removed from the military and will serve time in federal prison. Today's sentence shows that my office will swiftly act to root out and punish those who seek to undermine our nation's security."

"Make no mistake, the PRC is engaged in an aggressive effort to undermine the national security of the U.S. and its partners," said Executive Assistant Director Larissa L. Knapp of the FBI's National Security Branch. "Zhao chose to betray the oath he took to our country and put others at risk by providing sensitive U.S. information to a PRC intelligence official. The Chinese Communist Party has repeatedly shown it will freely break any law or norm to achieve a perceived intelligence advantage. Today's sentencing demonstrates, yet again, the inability of China's Intelligence Services to prevent the FBI and our vital partners from apprehending and prosecuting the spies China recruits."

"Mr. Zhao betrayed his oath to the United States and deserves to be held fully accountable for accepting bribes in exchange for transmitting sensitive U.S. military information to an intelligence officer from the People's Republic of China," said Acting Special Agent in Charge Angel Cruz of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) Office of Special Projects. "NCIS will continue to leverage its unique law enforcement and counterintelligence authorities to vigorously pursue those who attempt to compromise our national security information. We are grateful to the FBI and Department of Justice for their substantial assistance to this lengthy investigation and greatly appreciate our continued partnership."

Zhao, who worked at Naval Base Ventura County in Port Hueneme and held a U.S. security clearance, engaged in a corrupt scheme to collect and transmit sensitive U.S. military information to the intelligence officer in violation of his official duties.

Between August 2021 and at least May 2023, Zhao received at least \$14,866 in at least 14 separate bribe payments from the intelligence officer. In exchange for the illicit payments, Zhao secretly collected and transmitted to the intelligence officer sensitive, non-public information regarding U.S. Navy operational security, military trainings and exercises, and critical infrastructure. Zhao entered restricted military and naval installations to collect and record this information.

Zhao transmitted plans for a large-scale maritime training exercise in the Pacific theatre, operational orders and electrical diagrams and blueprints for a Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar system located in Okinawa, Japan.

He used sophisticated encrypted communication methods to transmit the information. He also destroyed evidence and concealed his relationship with the intelligence officer. Zhao's conduct violated his official duties to protect such information and the oath he swore to protect the United States.

The FBI Los Angeles Field Office's Counterintelligence and Cyber Division and NCIS conducted the investigation. IRS-Criminal Investigation provided substantial assistance.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Annamartine Salick, Sarah Gerdes, Christine Ro and Kathrynne Seiden for the Central District of California prosecuted the case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Ryan Waters for the Central District of California and Trial Attorney Adam Barry of the National Security Division's Counterintelligence and Export Control Section provided valuable assistance.

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