

EUROPE

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Russians jailed for spying on Ukrainian naval aviation test site for China

Reuben F Johnson *JDW Correspondent*

Kiev

Key Points

- Two Russians have been jailed in Ukraine for spying on the NITKA naval aviation training facility on behalf of China
- Chinese intelligence operatives have made a number of attempts to glean vital information about the site with a view to building a similar capability of their own

A Russian national, Aleksandr Yermakov, has been given a six-year prison term after being convicted of spying on behalf of the People's Republic of China (PRC), according to the Ukrainian newspaper *Sevodnya*.

The specific target of his activities was the Land-based Naval Aviation Testing and Training Complex (Nazemniy Ispitatelno-Tryenirovochniy Kompleks Aviatsii - NITKA) located in the Crimea near the city of Saki. The facility, built during Soviet times, remains the only naval aviation training facility in all of the former USSR configured for the Soviet-designed Admiral Kuznetsov-class aircraft carriers.

Details of the activities of Chinese intelligence trying to steal classified information on the NITKA base was provided to the newspaper by an official from the Counterintelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), who would only identify himself for publication as 'Oleg N'. The paper also reported that the SBU would not officially declare China as the nation behind these espionage activities, but stated that confirmation that the Chinese were behind the intended theft of classified material "had been provided by diplomatic sources".

As stated in court, Yermakov was assisted by his 35-year old son, who was also given a prison term. His son had provided a vehicle for the transfer of military-related technology and other information out of Ukraine by "registering an offshore company that provided services in the sphere of arms deliveries. The profile of the company was to provide a full spectrum of military technical, testing methods and design information based on the initiatives of received orders".

Chinese intelligence had allegedly promised to pay USD1 million for the delivery of documentation on the NITKA training facility and its operations in the form of drawings, digital photos and information on flash drives. "Yermakov's son made several trips to the PRC, where he visited People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) facilities and met with their representatives," *Sevodnya* reported.

The PLAN's interest in NITKA dates back to the Chinese acquisition of the partially built Kuznetsov-class carrier *Varyag*, which was sold by the Nikolayev shipyards in 1998 to a Chinese tourism company for just USD20 million. The original Chinese buyers had promised the ship would be turned into a casino and entertainment complex, to be moored at the former Portuguese enclave of Macau, but the ship was soon moved to the Dalian shipyards, where it has been undergoing a refit for several years.

"The Chinese need their own NITKA" for training their carrier pilots, reported the Ukrainian daily, "and they have already begun building their own complex, which Yermakov proposed could be accelerated by utilising the documents from Ukraine." The sources that spoke to *Sevodnya* state that, in addition to "digital data, drawings and construction documents the Russian duo had prepared some 1,500 A4-size pages of documents" to hand over to Chinese intelligence. This information had a value "to the national interests of Ukraine in the hundreds of millions of dollars".

This is not the first time China's espionage services have tried to gain information about the NITKA facility. Last year several Ukrainians from the city of Zaparozhe, including a military officer, were given prison terms for attempting to sell information on the base. A senior People's Liberation Army colonel named as Yao Tzunu was also sentenced as part of these same proceedings, but was expelled from Ukraine in mid-July 2010 as per diplomatic protocols rather than being imprisoned.

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