



Washington suffers from serious form of paranoia

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The United States might be the most powerful country in the world. But its capital Washington is undoubtedly the most paranoid place on the planet as exhibited this past Tuesday.

In a front-page report, The Wall Street Journal quoted unnamed sources close to the US intelligence community as saying that Wendi Deng, former wife of media mogul Rupert Murdoch, is lobbying for a high-profile construction project funded by the Chinese government in Washington. The report also said the planned \$100 million "Chinese Garden" at the US National Arboretum was deemed a national security risk because it included a 70-foot-high tower that could potentially be used for surveillance.

With due respect for the newspaper, the reporters clearly did not press their sources hard enough to get the facts, given the gravity of the allegation.

Anyone who has visited the arboretum knows that a six-story-high building in the 400-acre (161.87-hectare) arboretum may be good for bird watching as it would offer a 360-degree eyeful of lushness—trees, shrubs, bushes and grass—but an ill-advised spot for surveillance as it would be far from anywhere.

The arboretum is 3 miles (4.82 kilometers) from Capitol Hill and 4 miles from the White House. My office at the National Press Building is probably a better spot for surveillance, as it is only a block from the US Treasury Department and two blocks from the White House.

The China Garden project dates back to 2003, and the US Congress approved its construction in 2008. The long-delayed project had been on the factsheet of the annual US-China Consultation on People-to-People Exchange for many years.

I covered the groundbreaking ceremony for the project in October 2016, which was attended by senior US Agriculture Department and State Department officials, including then undersecretary of state Catherine Novelli and principal deputy assistant secretary of state Susan Thornton, who is now the acting assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Exactly how this might turn out to be a Chinese spy project, according to the WSJ, is beyond anybody's wildest imagination. No wonder a Chinese embassy representative said the report was "full of groundless speculations".

If the Chinese government were to use the WSJ logic, it would not allow any US citizen to have a building or live within 3 to 4 miles of Zhongnanhai or the Great Hall of the People because they could pose a national security threat.

I am glad Beijing is not even half as paranoid as Washington.

Also on Tuesday, Reuters reported that US lawmakers had urged AT&T to cut all commercial ties with Huawei Technologies and reject China Mobile's plans to enter the US market. The lawmakers also threatened US companies that having ties with the two Chinese firms could hamper their ability to do business with the US government. The news came a week after AT&T dropped its plan to sell Huawei's latest smartphone, the Mate 10, also under the pressure of US lawmakers.

Of late, the lawmakers have also introduced bills aimed at banning business with Huawei and ZTE, and more strictly scrutinizing Chinese companies investing in the US. The paranoia is so severe that many US experts, such as Gary Hufbauer of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, and Dan Ikenson of Cato Institute are alarmed.

Some Chinese want their government to return the favor by targeting Apple and other US companies that have access to Chinese citizens' data. There is little doubt that the powerful US intelligence agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency, are exploiting all means possible in China, including through US companies.

Yet I am glad the Chinese government has not shown the same paranoia as the US lawmakers and the WSJ.