

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio in February sent letters to 22 universities with a very specific request: Cut ties with Chinese institutions that have "ensnared" scholars in schemes to steal cutting-edge U.S. technology.

Texas A&M University was one of the 22 schools, and Rubio called special attention to its affiliation with Ocean University in Qingdao, which he said "actively supports Beijing's military-industrial complex."

A&M leaders responded the next day, telling the Florida senator that the university system coordinates with the FBI on a "near-daily basis" to detect espionage, and that A&M had already "mitigated" or eliminated 200 study abroad programs, research partnerships or other "instances of activity" that showed evidence of foreign influence.

As for Ocean University, "those affiliations no longer exist or are being terminated," A&M President M. Katherine Banks and System Chancellor John Sharp said in a letter to Rubio.

Among the casualties of the crackdown was a climate research collaboration called the International Laboratory for High-Resolution Earth System Prediction.

The program used one of the world's fastest supercomputers to run complex climate simulations that researchers said would "establish Texas A&M University as the leader in climate modeling" and provide a more accurate foundation for climate studies.

A&M abruptly terminated the project in February, about halfway through its planned five-year lifespan. The official reason was that the Chinese partner, a government laboratory, defaulted on its contract. But the project would have been spiked anyway for security reasons, Texas A&M University spokeswoman Kelly Brown said.

Leaders of the Chinese lab have ties to Ocean University.

The shutdown surprised some in the scientific community, prompting concern that deteriorating U.S. relations with China and Russia could hinder urgently needed collaboration on climate research.

"The idea that we should stop basic scientific research, particularly on problems as pressing as climate change, or curtail it because of geopolitical concerns is deeply counterproductive," said Zeke Hausfather, senior fellow at the Breakthrough Institute, an environmental research group in California. "To the extent that this particular program was a casualty of that, it seems very problematic."

The 'China Initiative'

Concern about Chinese academic interference has grown in recent years. During the Trump administration, the Justice Department led an effort to crack down on Beijing's theft of American intellectual property.

Lawmakers and government agencies have put concerted pressure on universities across the country to be vigilant -- especially in regard to researchers who don't disclose their foreign affiliations.

Some of those universities have fired such professors; other researchers have been indicted on federal criminal charges as alleged risks to national security. In 2020, an A&M professor was charged with wire fraud, making false statements and conspiracy for allegedly hiding an association with China that would have prohibited him from participating in a six-figure NASA grant. The case is pending.

Civil rights groups criticized the Justice Department's "China Initiative" for sparking discrimination against Asian Americans. After years of investigations on campuses, the Department of Justice ended the program in February.

Still, intellectual property investigations at universities remain a priority, FBI officials said.

"The FBI Counterintelligence Program has never wavered on investigating the theft of intellectual property," said Tam Dao, supervisory special agent for the FBI's Houston Counterintelligence Task Force. "IP theft threatens our nation's economic competitiveness and jeopardizes U.S. leadership in the areas of industrial innovation, emerging science and technology."

Rubio's letter to the A&M System came Feb. 8, weeks before the end of the Justice Department program. He urged 22 universities across the U.S. to terminate academic and research partnerships with Chinese universities that support Beijing's military-civil fusion strategy -- a term that refers to the People's Liberation Army's efforts to become the most technologically advanced military in the world.

Two of the 22 universities are in Texas: University of Texas-Dallas and Texas A&M.

UT-Dallas President Richard C. Benson responded to Rubio's questions about partnerships with Southeast University in Nanjing, China.

The university's only involvement with Southeast University is a two-week summer exchange program, and it is set to expire in 2023, Benson said in a letter to Rubio. No joint research takes place, and UT-Dallas doesn't host any faculty, graduate students or visiting scientists, Benson wrote.

"We assure you that the University shares your concerns about threats to our national security," Benson said. "We are particularly grateful for the assistance that we receive from our local FBI field office in this regard. The university is very careful about its international partnerships -- not only when selecting partners but also in determining the appropriate scope of collaborative activities with each partner. We do not do anything that would advance subject-specific opportunities to harm the United States."

The climate lab

In 2018, Texas A&M, the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado and the Qingdao Pilot National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology established a partnership, in part to address a growing problem in climate research.

As climate models have become more accurate, they've also required more powerful computers. Researchers say the models require 10,000 times more computing power today than they did when climate modeling started in the early 1990s.

Of the hundreds of supercomputers around the world powerful enough to run complex climate models, only a fraction are available in the U.S. for such research -- and even then, projects must compete for time on the machines.

By partnering with the Chinese institution, A&M researchers gained access to China's Sunway TaihuLight supercomputer, which is capable of trillions of calculations per second and which once simulated the universe with 10 trillion digital particles.

Researchers at the Qingdao climate lab were using the computer to generate "high-resolution" simulations of the Earth's climate. By doing so, they hoped to provide a new foundation for climate researchers to predict the effects of climate change.

But the Qingdao lab has documented ties to Ocean University. Lixin Wu, director of the lab, is also vice president of Ocean. Kehou Pan, a biology professor at the university, sits on the lab's steering committee, according to a project overview obtained by Inside Climate News and Hearst Newspapers.

Ocean University supports Beijing's military-industrial complex and conducts classified research for the People's Liberation Army, Rubio said in his letter. Texas A&M had already closed one Ocean University-affiliated program, the Confucius Institute, after public pressure from lawmakers in 2018, the senator noted.

In February, Texas A&M shut down the climate collaboration, deleting many of the project's webpages and data.

'Robust' ties to FBI

The Texas A&M System -- which encompasses 11 campuses, eight state agencies, a health science center and a research campus in Bryan -- has monitored its foreign collaborations for years.

The system's Research Security Office regularly reviews international agreements. Texas A&M University in College Station and the Texas A&M University System had a "robust" relationship with the FBI, administrators said in their response to Rubio.

The more than 200 "instances of activity" that showed evidence of "foreign talent recruitment" involved study abroad programs, gift agreements, book publishing and sponsored research, said the A&M system's chief research security officer, Kevin Gamache.

"Foreign talent recruitment" refers to foreign state-sponsored attempts to recruit researchers working abroad. Those researchers are often American and primarily employed by an American university -- but they may have research contracts or partnerships with foreign institutions.

The Chinese government targets American universities because they're centers of research and innovation, and because Americans generally respect academic freedom and the idea of open research, said Jamil N. Jaffer, founder and executive director of the National Security Institute at George Mason University's Antonin Scalia Law School.

"The reality is that this is a concerted effort by the Chinese government to engage in widespread industrial, economic and national security espionage, and we've got to confront it," Jaffer said.

Banks and Sharp said in their letter to Rubio that A&M leaders didn't anticipate any let-up in their security efforts.

"As the research security threats evolve, we will continue to adapt our research security program to address them," they wrote. "Texas A&M University and the Texas A&M University System remain committed to maintaining this high-level excellence in our research security efforts in the future."

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