

China Accused of Economic Espionage. American TV's Message to Chinese Spies: "Do as US Says, Not as US Does"

By [Peter Hart](#)

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Early this week, the FBI announced that five Chinese hackers had been indicted for spying on American companies. That's right, economic espionage.

To anyone who has a passing familiarity with the Edward Snowden NSA revelations, this might sound more than a little hypocritical. The agency is involved in what you might call economic espionage against interests in a number of countries—including Brazil's national oil company Petrobras and [German technology companies](#).

Lucky for the FBI, American network newscasts either don't know this, or think it's not important to raise the issue of US hypocrisy.

On ABC World News (5/19/14), anchor [Diane Sawyer](#) led the broadcast by telling viewers that "the United States is making an unprecedented charge against another country, the Chinese, charging a team of Chinese spies with stealing American inventions and costing a lot of American jobs."

Correspondent [Pierre Thomas](#) followed up:

These are the faces of five Chinese government spies indicted today by the Justice Department, accused of spying on American companies, costing them millions of dollars and causing thousands of Americans to lose their jobs.

Sawyer closed the segment by saying, "Going after the spies around the world tonight."

The other networks weren't much different. CBS Evening News anchor [Scott Pelley](#) (5/20/14) previewed the story with this: "Tonight, was China caught red-handed? The Chinese military is charged with stealing secrets of US businesses."

He went on:

China's military has attacked major US companies in a computer war that kills American jobs. That is the allegation today in a grand jury indictment of Chinese military officers.

And NBC Nightly News anchor [Brian Williams](#) sounded the alarm at the top of his May 20

broadcast: “Stealing secrets from some of the biggest companies in America. Tonight, espionage charges as the US fights back in the high-stakes spy wars with China.”

The newscasts spent so much time loading up on hyperbole and jingoism that there was no evidently no way to note that the US government is accusing China of doing something that closely resembles US actions. It’s not hard to point out the glaring hypocrisy; the New York Times ([5/20/14](#)) noted that this angle could prove useful to the Chinese, who “have used Mr. Snowden’s disclosures about the National Security Agency to make the case that the position of the United States is hypocritical because it also conducts attacks on Chinese firms.”

The Times ([5/21/14](#)) presented a fuller accounting of the NSA’s history the next day. Under the somewhat awkward headline “Fine Line Seen in US Spying on Companies,” [David Sanger](#) reported:

The National Security Agency has never said what it was seeking when it invaded the computers of Petrobras, Brazil’s huge national oil company, but angry Brazilians have guesses: the company’s troves of data on Brazil’s offshore oil reserves, or perhaps its plans for allocating licenses for exploration to foreign companies.

Nor has the NSA said what it intended when it got deep into the computer systems of China Telecom, one of the largest providers of mobile phone and Internet services in Chinese cities.

So what’s the difference? Sanger reports that US government officials have a defense: They claim they are

never acting on behalf of specific American companies. But the government does not deny it routinely spies to advance American economic advantage, which is part of its broad definition of how it protects American national security.

It’s a distinction—a “fine line,” if you will—that many other countries might have trouble seeing. Indeed, as Marcy Wheeler (Emptywheel, [5/19/14](#)) pointed out, “much of the charged activity involves stealing information about trade disputes—the same thing NSA engages in all the time.” And even if you accept the NSA’s claims about the limits of what it does, that wouldn’t move its economic spying from the “illegal” to the “legal” category (Lawfare, [5/21/14](#)).

What would TV broadcasts about Chinese spying look like if they acknowledged this fact? That would be a lot less helpful to the FBI—and a lot more informative for the viewers.

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