Chinese hackers gained access to huge trove of Americans' cell records

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The Biden administration has not yet said it has been able to evict the Chinese from phone companies' networks. The National Security Council did not respond to a request for comment.

The leak of Call Detail Records would constitute a significant national security risk, potentially allowing Beijing to identify American spies, glean intimate details on the lives of U.S. political or business figures, or trace the movements of American troops and law enforcement personnel.

The latter risk, in particular, has worried government investigators.

5G infrastructure is more densely distributed than traditional cell towers. That means providers now retain data that can in some cases pinpoint a phone to within a few meters of the owner's location — which is far more precise than what was possible in the past. "That's hugely important for Chinese intelligence," said the first person.

It is not clear if the Chinese accessed the logs at one telecommunications provider or several, for how long, and whether they still retain access to it. The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday that Salt Typhoon embedded itself inside some providers at least eight months ago.

Those types of basic questions have proved exceptionally difficult to answer, and the uncertainty surrounding them is emblematic of what some believe is the bigger problem in the breaches: spotting an elusive Chinese hacking crew — and kicking them out.

Salt Typhoon has embedded itself inside often-aging networking equipment, including routers and switches, that do not run the Windows operating system and are hard for digital forensics experts to probe, the second person said. The enormous size and complexity of the phone providers' networks have exacerbated the work of spotting the Chinese, both people added.

"It's not a traditional compromise, it's all this niche networking stuff," the second person said. "It is hard to figure out how they landed there."
