



Australia News

How Australians' 'data-hoovering' Chinese made-cars could be secretly sending their private data to the communist nation

The warning came as the former chair of Australia's powerful Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security warned foreign interference and espionage has now supplanted terrorism as the country's greatest threat.



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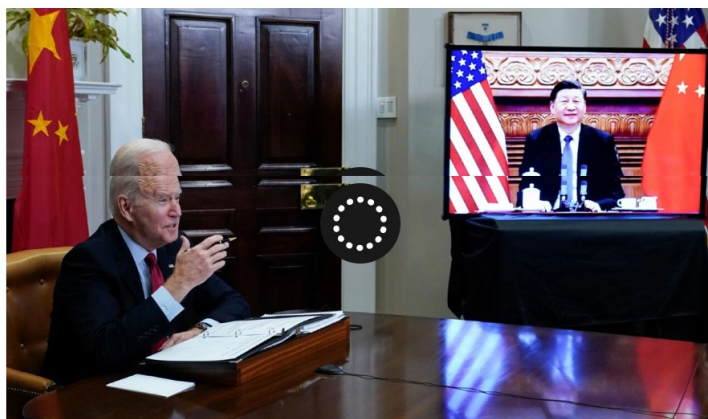
Australians are being told for the first time to avoid buying Chinese manufactured vehicles if they want to protect their privacy and data.

In concerns similar to those raised around Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei, national and cyber security experts are warning modern cars manufactured in the communist nation are "data-hoovering computers on wheels" with the ability to build "patterns of life".

"Long gone are the days when a car was a mode of transport to get you from A to B," said the Director of Cyber Intelligence at CyberCX, Katherine Mansted.

"There are more lines of code in your standard car in Australia than there is in a Boeing 747 jet."

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The intelligence expert warned that with “software comes vulnerability” when it comes to hacking, surveillance and data collection threats.

Through their connections to phones and satellites, modern cars have the technology to track and trace where users have been.

There are also broader concerns vehicle SIM cards, which transmit “Over the Air” updates, are acting as potential back doors for hackers or security services to listen into vehicle conversations without the driver knowing.

“(In one case) the car was able to actually relay voice data to the person listening on the other end without the user’s consent and also without the ability to terminate that call,” said the founder of CarExpert, Paul Maric.

“Even to me, someone who is not very security conscious, that is very alarming.

“My understanding is that has been patched at the moment but ultimately if that existed at some point you wonder how many instances of this exist out there in the wild that perhaps we don’t know about yet.”



Australians are being told for the first time to avoid buying Chinese manufactured vehicles if they want to protect their privacy and data. Picture: Costfoto/Future Publishing via Getty Images

The number of Chinese-manufactured cars sold on Australian shores reached 122,845 units in 2022, a 61.1 per cent rise on the year before.

It lifted China to the fourth largest source of motor vehicles for Australian buyers.

“Certainly, if you are a politician, or a journalist, or an activist or an academic who is working on issues relating to China or national security, then you need to be extra cautious about the Chinese technology devices that you use,” said Liberal Senator James Paterson.

The former chair of the powerful Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security believes Chinese laws pose once unimaginable problems because of a 2017 law called the “Chinese intelligence law”.

“(It) requires all Chinese companies and individuals to assist Chinese intelligence agencies and to keep that covert,” he said.

“The problem that poses, is that any Australian citizen... could effectively have their data fall into the hands of the Chinese Intelligence services and be none the wiser that that has happened.”



National and cyber security experts are warning modern cars manufactured in the communist nation are "data-hoovering computers on wheels" with the ability to build "patterns of life". Picture: VCG/VCG via Getty Images

Ms Mansted said a small amount of leaked data could give power to "people, companies or governments" and described 21st century vehicles as "data hoovering computers" capable of documenting, "where you go and how long you stop".

"You can build an inference about who a person is seeing," she said.

When paired with other network information including mobile phone contacts, Ms Mansted said it "builds a really rich picture about who you are, what you do and what you stand for".



Balloons provide advantage for military powers in 'intelligence gathering'

Central to the concern is the enormous growth in sales of Chinese vehicles within Australia from car companies including MG, Haval and Great Wall.

Data from the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries showed that last year a Chinese owned car company (MG) was among Australia's top ten manufacturers for sold cars for the first time, beating Volkswagen, Isuzu and Subaru.

Budget Chinese car companies are significantly undercutting other brands on price, with their sales now expected to boom.

Added to that, many vehicles are now built in China.



Senator James Paterson has issued a warning over Chinese-manufactured vehicle. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Martin Ollman

Cyber and national security expert John Blaxland said China "was in a league of its own" when it came to collecting data.

"No matter what type of manufacturing is going on inside of China, you can expect that data collected by those companies will be accessible by Chinese Communist Party authorities," he said.

"I think we need to assume that our conversations are being listened to.

"You can no longer assume that your conversations are really private unless you have removed yourself from the technology."

He said Australians should keep a broader mind about the ways in which their personal information could be at risk.

"If you are a member of the general public, the personal risk to you might be less, but you are still potentially exposed, as are all Australians, to mass data collection which the Chinese government engages in for intelligence purposes," he said.

Senator Paterson warned foreign interference and espionage has now supplanted terrorism as Australia's greatest threat.



"China is the overwhelming source of that threat," he said.

"A lot of that threat is cyber enabled.

"What that means is they are interested in us and how we operate. They are interested in mapping how our cities work, because it might be useful to them in the future."

Given China is already working on cracking digitally encrypted data through quantum computers, a treasure trove of Australians' private information could yet end up in the hands of the authoritarian state.



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