

Why China Is Subsidizing Cheap Surveillance Cameras

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Hikvision began as an entity of China, and its largest shareholder remains the state-owned China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC), a defense-industrial firm
- › Hikvision receives generous support from China's Communist leaders, allowing the company to offer low prices and expand abroad rapidly, outpacing much of its competition
- › Hikvision cameras are used to surveil prisoners in "re-education" camps in China's Xinjiang region, raising significant human rights concerns
- › In the U.S., federal agencies were ordered by Congress to remove Hikvision cameras by August 2019 due to national security concerns
- › Concerns have been raised that the Hikvision devices may have features, such as microphones, that can be turned on remotely, allowing them to relay information back to China

There's a good chance you haven't heard of Hikvision — and also a good chance that their cameras have been watching you nonetheless. The Chinese video surveillance company is a heavyweight in the industry, capable of producing 260,000 cameras daily, which works out to two for every three people born each day.¹

Hikvision began as an entity of China, and its largest shareholder remains the state-owned China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC), a defense-industrial firm.² With a \$3 billion line of credit direct from the Chinese government,³ Hikvision

receives generous support from China's Communist leaders, allowing the company to offer low prices and expand abroad rapidly, outpacing much of its competition.

However, concerns over the cameras' surveillance capabilities have surfaced, along with outcry over their use against the Uyghur population, have surfaced, with many calling for the cameras' removal.

Widespread Surveillance Cameras Used in Human Rights Abuses

Hikvision cameras are used to surveil prisoners in "re-education" camps in China's Xinjiang region. Hundreds of thousands of people from the Uyghur population, a mostly-Muslim ethnic group, have been sentenced to prison terms in the camps, while more than 1 million have been detained.⁴

The Uyghurs speak their own language and make up the minority of the Xinjiang population. China has allegedly organized a mass migration of their ethnic majority (Han Chinese) into the region to "dilute" the Uyghur population, which has said it fears that their population may be erased.⁵

Reports claim that Uyghurs have been interned in the camps and China has engaged in other human rights abuses against the population, including forcibly sterilizing Uyghur women, separating children from their families and breaking cultural traditions.⁶ Detainees in the Xinjiang camp have also described Hikvision cameras as monitoring them 24/7.⁷ The Telegraph reported:⁸

"In the confines of his small cell, Ovalbek Turdakun was watched 24/7. At any attempt to speak to others he was instantly told to be quiet, while lights in the room were on round the clock, making it impossible to know what time of day it was.

Turdakun and his fellow detainees in the Xinjiang camp were not watched by guards, but by software. Cameras made by the Chinese company Hikvision monitored his every move, according to an account he gave to US surveillance

website IPVM. Turdakun had never heard of the company, but recognized the logo after being evacuated to the US last month.”

Hikvision has five partnerships with Xinjiang authorities – worth a combined £224 million, or approximately \$279.6 million – that have been in place since 2017 and extend until 2040. The company’s products, which include facial recognition and drones, have been used to surveil mosques and other areas in Uyghur regions, but they’re not contained to them.⁹

“More than a million of the same company’s cameras are in Britain’s schools, hospitals and police departments. Tesco, Costa Coffee and McDonald’s have purchased Hikvision cameras. They are present in a string of Government buildings,” The Telegraph noted.¹⁰

Hikvision Cameras Surveilling Britain, US

Hikvision has expanded rapidly, with revenues of more than \$11.8 billion annually, even as the company has been instrumental in China’s human rights offenses. “Among the policies that Hikvision’s products have supported is China’s wide-ranging crackdown against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other minority groups in the western province of Xinjiang,” The Atlantic reported.¹¹

“There, CETC has supplied military-style command and surveillance systems, facial-recognition systems that automate ethnic profiling, and a police program that aggregates data and flags people deemed potentially threatening.

... Far from being appalled by Hikvision’s role in China’s atrocities, however, plenty of foreign leaders are intrigued. They see an opportunity to acquire tools that could reduce crime and spur growth. Of course, the authoritarian-leaning among them also see a chance to monitor their domestic challengers and cement their control.”

In Britain, 6 million cameras are in use – most of them provided by Hikvision – while the company’s presence has also increased, increasing from 70 U.K. staff members in 2018

to 128 in 2021. Among Hikvision's technologies widely used in Britain were heat detection cameras brought on to detect COVID-19 symptoms in 2020.¹²

Worldwide, millions of Hikvision's cameras are in use, concentrating in major cities, including more than 750,000 devices in the U.S. The Atlantic summed up their prevalence:¹³

"Offering huge discounts to American redistributors, Hikvision has supplied cameras to Peterson Air Force Base, in Colorado, as well as the U.S. embassies in Kyiv, Ukraine, and Kabul, Afghanistan. More than 90 companies relabeled the cameras with their own brands, according to IPVM, a surveillance-industry-research group."

This means that, even though federal agencies were ordered by Congress to remove Hikvision cameras by August 2019 due to national security concerns, it was difficult to detect all of them.

Hikvision Cameras May Be Watching Your Neighborhood

Many people have embraced the convenience of "smart" devices in their homes and wearable devices. It's possible not only to have smartphones but also connected alarm clocks, vehicles, refrigerators and doorbells, each of which reveals another layer of details about your most personal moments, which could be used for nefarious purposes.

Hikvision has a U.S. subsidiary called EZVIZ, which is based in California and calls itself a "global smart home security brand" that creates a "safe, convenient and smart life for users through its intelligent devices, advanced AI technologies and cloud services."¹⁴ Offering an array of indoor and outdoor security cameras and smart home devices, you can welcome Hikvision products to surveil your own movements, courtesy of automated lights, locks, doorbells and more.

Its Smart Door Viewer will even examine faces, in a chilling example of just how much privacy is sacrificed when surveillance products are welcomed into our homes. The

Atlantic reported:¹⁵

“In 2018, the Consumer Electronics Show, which is to electronics what the Detroit Auto Show is to cars, gave EZVIZ an innovation award for its Smart Door Viewer. The device watches through a peephole, examines faces, and compares them with images in a user-defined database.

Let this sink in. The same technology that is contributing to the greatest human tragedy of this century may also watch over streets in your city, buildings in your neighborhood, and the living room next door.”

As The Telegraph reported,¹⁶ Britain’s Crossbench Peer Lord Alton warned of the dangers of intertwining mass surveillance systems with daily living. “[W]e simply cannot allow the tools of genocide to continue to be used so readily in our daily lives. Mass surveillance systems have always been the handmaiden of fascism. The Government should come forward with a timetable to remove these cameras and technology from the public sector supply chain.”

Moving Toward a Prison State

The endgame of increasing surveillance isn’t to make it easier for you to turn down your thermostat or create a grocery list using your smart refrigerator — the future reality is much more sinister. Measures toward authoritarian control and mass surveillance have been increasing worldwide, and in the U.S. Silicon Valley and the national security state are now fused, according to one of my favorite independent journalists, Whitney Webb.¹⁷

The decades-long wars against domestic dissidence have always involved technology like databases, and now it’s progressing to technology like facial recognition apps. Webb wrote about “tech tyranny” at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing that a document from the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) — acquired through a FOIA request — said changes were needed to keep a technological advantage over China:¹⁸

“This document suggests that the U.S. follow China’s lead and even surpass them in many aspects related to AI-driven technologies, particularly their use of mass surveillance.

This perspective clearly clashes with the public rhetoric of prominent U.S. government officials and politicians on China, who have labeled the Chinese government’s technology investments and export of its surveillance systems and other technologies as a major ‘threat’ to Americans’ ‘way of life.’”

In an excerpt from his book, “The Digital Silk Road,” Jonathan Hillman, a senior economics fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, describes how he took two of Hikvision’s sales training courses for North America, which encouraged reps to use social media exposure and speaking engagements to boost the company’s image.

Technological capabilities were also covered, including “intrusion detection,” “people counting,” “heat mapping” and “line crossing detection,” which were featured as tools for protecting private property but could also be used to advance authoritarian control:¹⁹

“Not mentioned was how these capabilities can be used in drastically different ways. People counting can also alert repressive governments when large groups are gathering. Line detection can alert local police when people come and go from a dissident’s house. Automated alarms can keep people from being free. Hikvision’s facial-recognition arsenal offers a single system to dole out punishments and rewards.”

‘Surveillance Capitalism’ Also Used for Social Control

As Hillman noted, it’s not only Hikvision that appears guilty of advancing a totalitarian state and turning a blind eye to human rights violations. Oracle, a multinational computer technology corporation headquartered in California, in the heart of Silicon Valley, has also marketed police applications of its products to countries with human rights concerns, including China, Mexico, Brazil and the United Arab Emirates.²⁰

Oracle, along with Google, were also contracted to “collect and track vaccine data” as part of Operation Warp Speed’s surveillance systems during the pandemic.²¹

In her book “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,” Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff reveals how the biggest tech companies in the world have also hijacked our personal data – so-called “behavioral surplus data streams” – without our knowledge or consent and are using it against us to generate profits for themselves.

There are no laws in place to curtail this brand-new type of surveillance capitalism, and the only reason it has been able to flourish over the past 20 years is because there's been an absence of laws against it, primarily because it has never previously existed. Surveillance has become the biggest for-profit industry on the planet, and your entire existence is now being targeted for profit – and control.

Circling back to Hikvision’s cameras, concerns have been raised that the devices may have features, such as microphones, that can be turned on remotely, allowing them to relay information back to China and acting as a “backdoor to Beijing.”²² The moral of the story is that once you open your door to surveillance, it’s difficult to know who might be watching, or why.

Sources and References

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