

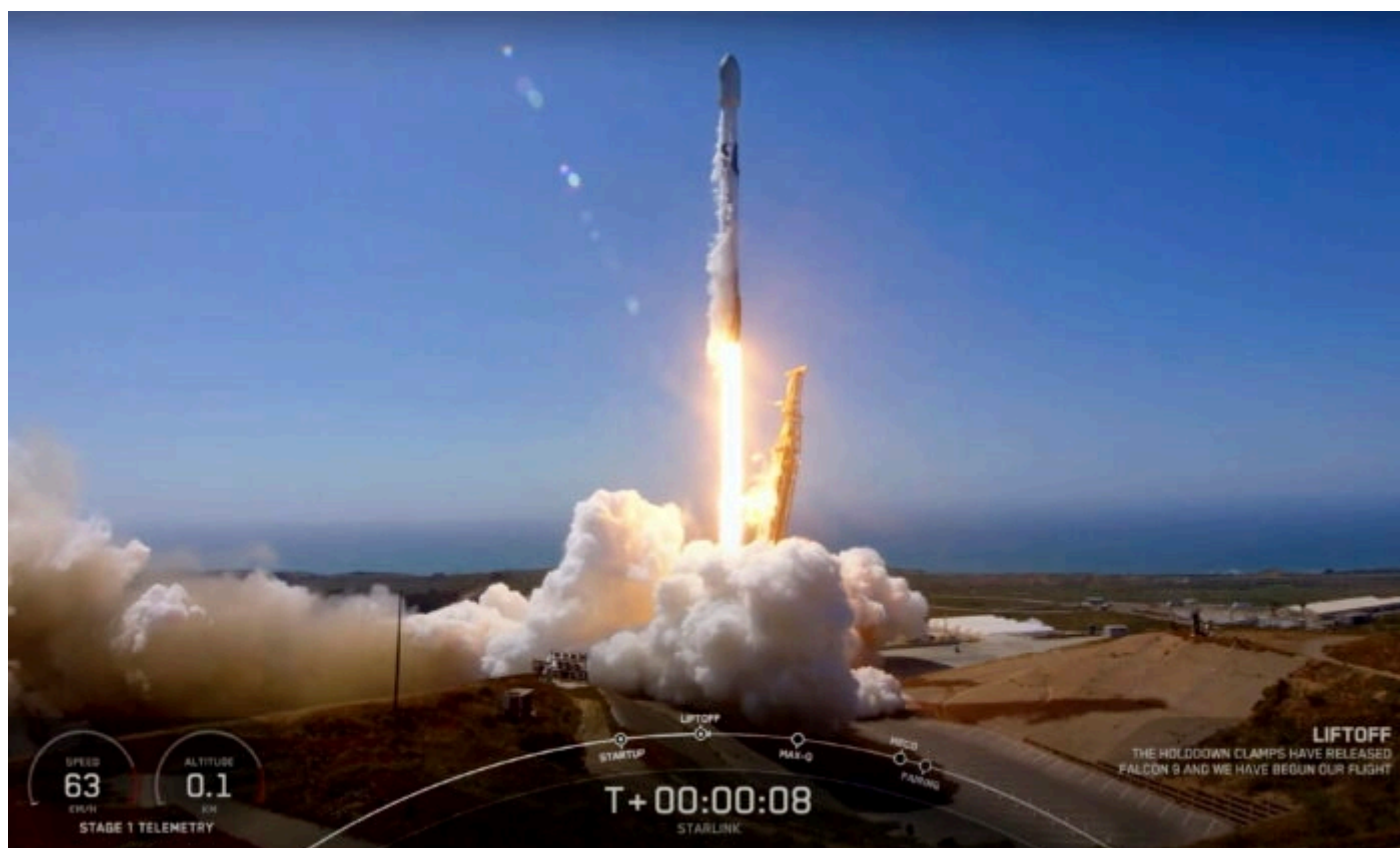
Feds Arrest Chinese National for Allegedly Flying Drone Over Vandenberg Space Force Base

Yinpiao Zhou was arrested at San Francisco International Airport just before boarding a flight back to China on Dec. 9.

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This video image provided by SpaceX, a SpaceX Falcon 9 mission to launch 53 Starlink satellites to low-Earth orbit from Space Launch Complex 4 East (SLC-4E), takes off from Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif., on May 13, 2022. SpaceX via AP



By Jill McLaughlin

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Federal agents arrested a Chinese national on Dec. 9 suspected of flying a drone over Vandenberg Space Force Base in California and taking photos of the SpaceX rocket pads on a day when the contractor launched a sensitive national reconnaissance payload.

Authorities arrested Yinpiao Zhou, 39, at the San Francisco International Airport just before he boarded a China-bound flight, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles.

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He is scheduled to make his first court appearance in San Francisco on Tuesday, according to the office's spokesman Ciaran McEvoy.



The U.S. Attorney's Office filed a criminal complaint on Nov. 30 in Santa Barbara County federal court. Zhou is charged with failure to



register a drone and violating national defense airspace, according to court documents.



Sections of the complaint were redacted.

Federal agents allege in the court document that Zhou traveled to Ocean Park, a park near Vandenberg Space Force Base, on Nov. 30 and flew a drone over the base.

SpaceX, owned by Elon Musk, has two pads at the base from which its Falcon 9 rockets are launched several times a year.

On that same day, SpaceX **launched** a sensitive payload developed for the National Reconnaissance Office, federal agents said.

SpaceX was selected by the U.S. Space Force to launch nine national security missions under its National Security Space Launch Phase 3 program, the Space Force announced on Oct. 18.

The **launch**, which occurred at 3:10 a.m., was successful, according to the National Reconnaissance Office.

Federal agents alleged that Zhou flew over the base and photographed sensitive areas of the military facility for 59 minutes that day, according to the court document.

The drone contained an SD card, which is a type of digital information storage device, according to the court document.



In this photo illustration, a DJI Mavic 2 Pro made by the Chinese drone maker hovers in place in Miami, Fla., on Dec. 15, 2021. Federal agents claim Yinpiao Zhou, 39, of China, used a similar drone to fly over national security airspace above Vandenberg Space Force Base on Nov. 30, 2024. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

“A review of the contents of the Drone SD Card showed several photographs of [the base] taken from an aerial viewpoint,” federal officials wrote in the criminal complaint.

The data taken from the photos show they were taken on Nov. 30 from an area above the base, according to federal officials.

Information taken from Zhou's cellphone was also analyzed by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). Federal agents said the phone show Zhou searched Google for the phrase "Vandenberg Space Force Base Drone Rules" on Dec. 8, federal officials wrote in the court document.

The phone also contained a WeChat message conversation between a WeChat user believed to be an account associated with Zhou, federal officials claim. WeChat is a Chinese messaging and social media application.

In the conversation on Oct. 21 and Oct. 22, communications allegedly focused on photos Zhou claimed to have taken with his drone.

The airspace above the base is designated as restricted for national security.

According to the court document, Zhou allegedly acknowledged to federal agents that he downloaded software for his drone that allowed him to bypass national security altitude restrictions.

A federal agent also said that Zhou recognized that photographing the SpaceX facility at the base was "probably not a good idea," according to the court record.

The Federal Aviation Administration rules require any drones over .55 pounds to be registered. The model allegedly used by Zhou—a DJI model Mavic 2—was about 2 pounds, according to a federal FAA special agent.

Mysterious drones have also allegedly been sighted hovering over other U.S. military facilities in the past two months, drawing concern among officials.

Congressman Tom Kean, Jr., of New Jersey, urged [immediate](#) federal action on Monday to address the growing concern over unexplained drone activity in New Jersey.

“I join thousands of New Jersey residents in deep frustration regarding the growing concerns over drones operating in our skies,” Kean wrote in a press release. “The safety and privacy of our residents must be a top priority, and right now, both are being put at risk.”

Kean called for the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Aviation Administration, and other federal agencies to deploy greater resources to investigate and address the escalating situation.

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