

Australian spy agency promotes anti-China witch-hunt

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The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country's main domestic spy agency, used its annual report, released last Wednesday, to further fuel a hysterical media campaign alleging widespread Chinese "interference" in Australian politics.

ASIO's public reports are always highly political documents. Their purpose is not to disclose the agency's activities, but to promote the anti-democratic agenda of successive governments, including ramping up the powers of ASIO and the entire military-intelligence apparatus.

For the past 16 years, ASIO's reports have centred on declarations that Australia is threatened by "Islamist terrorism." Such claims have been used to justify Australia's role in predatory US-led wars in the Middle East, and sweeping inroads into civil and political rights.

This year's report, while maintaining the "war on terror" rhetoric, includes vague and unsubstantiated assertions that "foreign powers" are conducting a wide-ranging campaign of "espionage" and "covert influence operations." It declares that the "the scale of the threat to Australia and its interests is unprecedented."

ASIO did not name any "foreign powers." But the media outlets that function as little more than adjuncts of the intelligence agencies and the political establishment, filled in the gap.

An article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper was headlined "ASIO battling spy threat from China and Russia." The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) declared that unnamed "government officials ... believe China is becoming more aggressive with its activities against Australia."

As in previous "exposures" of supposed Chinese "espionage" and "political interference," the articles provided no evidence or detail for their sweeping assertions. That is because they are part of what can be described only as a long-running exercise in state-propaganda.

The purpose of the repeated anti-China campaigns by the ABC, Fairfax and Murdoch-owned publications has been to legitimise Australia's central role in US plans for war in the Asia-Pacific, including against North Korea, and, above all, China.

This is in line with Australia's integration into Washington's "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up in the region, announced by US President Barack Obama in 2011 from the floor of the Australian parliament. Since then, Labor and Liberal-National governments have expanded US basing arrangements and deepened the collaboration between the Australian and American militaries.

ASIO's report coincided with Australian involvement in US provocations against North Korea, including the deployment of two Australian frigates to waters near the Korean peninsula, ready to participate in any US-launched attack.

Because these policies are deeply unpopular, they cannot be discussed openly. To fill the breach, and attempt to create a nationalist and pro-war atmosphere, lies and fabrications are invented out of whole cloth, presenting China as an aggressive power and an imminent danger to Australia.

In its report, ASIO asserts, without evidence: "Foreign intelligence services sought access to privileged and/or classified information on Australia's alliances and partnerships." It warns of "foreign powers clandestinely seeking to shape the opinions of members of the Australian public, media organisations and government officials."

ASIO claims that by "seeking to unduly influence public perceptions of issues," these activities "represent a threat to our sovereignty, the integrity of our national institutions and the exercise of our citizens' rights."

This is in line with several joint "investigations," earlier this year, by the ABC and Fairfax, conducted in close

collaboration with ASIO. The investigations “exposed” that a handful of Chinese-born businessmen made donations to the Labor, Liberal and National parties.

These were supposedly part of a coordinated campaign by the Chinese Communist Party to “interfere” in Australian politics, even though the businessmen named included long-time Australian citizens and avowed opponents of the Chinese government.

University research funded by Chinese companies has been targeted also in the witch-hunt. Fairfax publications and the *Guardian* recently warned that research into areas such as marine technologies and solar power may, in the future, have military implications.

The ASIO report obliquely concedes that the activities are benign and mundane. It cynically states, “activities that may appear relatively harmless today can have significant future consequences.”

ASIO’s rhetoric mirrors the McCarthyite campaign being waged by the US intelligence agencies, in league with the Democratic Party and the corporate press, against supposed “Russian interference” in American politics.

In addition to pressing for the Trump administration to escalate the confrontation initiated by the Obama administration against Russia, it seeks to present growing opposition to militarism, social inequality and poverty among ordinary people as the result of a Kremlin plot.

ASIO’s report foreshadows a similar crackdown on democratic rights, in the name of combatting an external “enemy.” It declares that the agency is “no longer meeting key performance indicators” and demands more resources for “personnel security assessments” and other measures to counter “foreign influence.”

In June, the spy agency demanded the extension of sweeping powers, associated with draconian anti-terror laws, to “foreign interference” investigations. These powers include secret detention and questioning for seven days without charge.

The Liberal-National government this month also issued draft legislation that would give relevant ministers sweeping “last resort” powers to impose binding directives on owners of “critical infrastructure,” including barring them from selling assets to foreign companies. The new laws are being advanced on the pretext of combatting “foreign espionage,” “sabotage” and “coercion.”

Last month, the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the government plans new legislation to target Chinese “sub-espionage,” including the creation of a foreign agent registry.

Among those identified by Fairfax as potential targets was a lobby group of Chinese-Australians contesting local elections. Chinese associations previously have been denounced for opposing aggressive US military activities against China in the South China Sea.

Chinese international students, who number an estimated 140,000, have been branded in media reports as a potential “fifth column” of the Chinese government.

ASIO’s report followed by an unprecedented address earlier this month by Frances Adams, the head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, whose remarks were later reinforced by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop.

Speaking at the University of Adelaide’s Confucius Centre, a body funded by the Chinese government, Adams warned “international students” that the “silencing of anyone in our society—from students to lecturers to politicians—is an affront to our values.”

Adamson was apparently referencing sketchy reports that inflated minor disagreements between Chinese students and lecturers, allegedly over how Chinese foreign policy was presented in classes.

Adamson told the students that when they disagreed with something, they should not “blindly condemn,” but “respectfully engage.” The thinly veiled message was that Chinese students are welcome to study and pay their exorbitant fees, but should think twice before disagreeing with the Australian government or its plans for war against China.

A week later, on October 15, reports appeared in the ABC and Fairfax, declaring that Australia was at the centre of a push by the “Five Eyes” spying network, headed by the US, to counter “China’s pervasive and subversive influence,” especially at universities.

The reports were based on statements by an unnamed “senior foreign diplomatic figure,” who menacingly told the ABC: “It’s time for the federal government to insist the Chinese comply with Australia’s values and interests.”

The campaign is a warning to students, young people and the entire working class. It presages more direct forms of political repression, as opposition mounts to the criminal and reckless US and Australian preparations for war against North Korea and China.



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