

Australian Defence Department seeks expanded powers over research

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In another sign of preparations for war, the Australian Department of Defence (DoD) has requested sweeping new powers over research, publication and the export of all technology in Australia, whether directly related to military purposes or not.

Universities, in particular, would be placed under wartime-style scrutiny, prohibited from undertaking collaborative research with countries regarded as US enemies, especially China, while being drawn more tightly into research jointly funded by the Pentagon.

According to a DoD submission, research and export controls first imposed on universities and companies by the last Labor government in 2012 must now be drastically tightened because of an altered “national security environment.”

No explanation of that declaration was provided. Instead the submission asked: “How has the national security environment changed?” It answered: “See classified Annex A.”

In other words, the calculations involved in the shift are being hidden from the Australian population, in order not to further fuel anti-war sentiment.

Annex A undoubtedly relates to preparations for involvement in US-led wars, particularly against China and Russia, which were identified in the 2018 Pentagon National Defense Strategy as threats to American global military and economic hegemony.

The request for new controls over all research was unveiled last month, in a definite context. The Liberal-National government and the Labor Party were jointly ramming through parliament “foreign interference” laws designed to crack down, above all, on anti-war dissent and anyone linked to China.

For two years there has been a relentless drumbeat of anti-China propaganda in the Australian corporate media, fuelled by unsubstantiated claims by US-linked intelligence agencies of pervasive Chinese “meddling” in the country, including via university research projects.

New allegations continue to surface, ranging from the

supposed threat of Huawei, the world’s largest telecommunications equipment supplier, subverting Australia’s proposed 5G network to Chinese students posting supposed misinformation on WeChat and other Chinese-language social media platforms.

One of the key reasons the DoD gave for demanding expanded powers under the 2012 Defence Trade Controls (DTC) Act was that “allied nations” could restrict Australian government, industry and university access to critical technologies unless “appropriate safeguards and protections” were introduced. “This could have significant consequences for ADF [Australian Defence Force] capability, inter-operability with partner forces and collaboration opportunities.”

The “inter-operability” and other demands are primarily those of the US ruling class and its military apparatus. Over the past decade, Washington has intensified its pressure for a greater Australian commitment to US preparations for war against China.

For all the propaganda about Chinese “interference” in Australia, Washington is politically intervening to ensure support for these military preparations.

The Defence submission calls for unlimited discretion to prohibit the publication of research, even for scientific purposes, and for warrantless entry, search, questioning and seizure powers to monitor compliance.

These are extraordinary powers, unprecedented since World War II. Under the 2012 Act, people currently face up to 10 years’ imprisonment for selling or otherwise “supplying” items on the Defence and Strategic Goods List (DSGL) or items covered by the Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty (DTCT) between Australia and the US.

Other offences cover “engaging in dealings” (such as research) relating to these items without a permit, and “publishing or otherwise disseminating” DSGL or DTCT technology to the public.

Until now, the listed items have consisted of either military or alleged “dual-use” technologies. Defence wants to extend these provisions to cover what is currently “uncontrolled

technology”—that is, all technology.

Defence wants the power to issue bans simply by asserting “reason to believe the technology is significant to developing or maintaining national defence capability or international relations of Australia.”

At present, “authorised officers”—who can be military officers or senior departmental officials—can enter any premises, including a university, question anyone and require the production of items or documents that allegedly relate to technology covered by the US-Australia DTCT. Only 24 hours’ notice must be given, and no judicial warrant or any other kind of warrant is required.

Defence wants those powers extended to cover all technology, raising the prospect of military raids on universities and companies even though their research is not included on any prohibited list in advance.

Defence Minister Marise Payne launched the DTC Act review in April, and entrusted it to a long-time intelligence insider, Vivienne Thom, who previously supervised the operation of the “counter-terrorism” legislation as Inspector General of Intelligence and Security.

At least 14 technology and IT institutions have objected to aspects of the Department of Defence (DoD) submission.

Group of Eight (G8) chief executive Vicki Thomson, representing eight elite universities, stated: “The extension of controls to ‘uncontrolled,’ unspecified technology would create significant uncertainty for researchers and those with whom they work, given the possibility that the DoD may declare at any point in time that a technology is ‘emerging sensitive’ and subject to controls on transfers.”

Thomson alluded to likely bans on overseas researchers, and requirements for universities to check the citizenship status of all staff. “A wide range of people would be in question—including foreign born Australian researchers, international PhD students in Australian universities, visiting Fellows or other research colleagues from overseas, multinational companies.”

Universities Australia, the peak body of the country’s 39 public universities, objected to the proposed banning of publication of technology at the “sole discretion” of Defence, “on the basis of information that is not open to public scrutiny.”

However, as the Defence submission revealed, the universities have already embraced, and helped enforce, military controls since the 2012 Act came into full effect two years ago. “Defence believes it has formed very productive relationships with key stakeholders over the past two years which have led to a high level of compliance with the DTC Act,” it said.

Defence promised to consult “affected groups” over its new demands “in the spirit of working together.” The

university submissions welcomed this offer, pointing to the likelihood of closer collaboration with the military, despite their current objections.

Starved of government funding, the universities have become dependent on war-related research, as well as attracting full fee-paying international students.

The Australian government is striving to meet the Trump administration’s demands for higher military spending. The Liberal-National government has allocated \$200 billion for military projects over the next decade and adopted a “defence industry plan” to make the country one of the top ten world exporters of weaponry.

A University of New South Wales (UNSW) submission warned the proposed restrictions could “seriously endanger” participation in an industry that “contributes hugely to Australia’s GDP, estimated at \$15 billion per annum for UNSW’s research and technology impact alone.”

University managements are also tying their institutions into joint research with US universities on “priority projects” under the US Department of Defense Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative (MURI), which the government joined in 2017.

In May, Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne congratulated four universities for winning funding in this year’s round of applications for Pentagon partnerships to “develop game-changing military capabilities.”

Griffith University, UNSW and University of Technology Sydney will work with Duke University, the University of Oregon and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on “integrated quantum sensing and control for high fidelity qubit operations.”

Sydney University and UNSW will partner with the University of Tennessee, Ohio State University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute on a project in material sciences.

This program is part of a wider picture. Universities in Australia, as in the US and internationally, are becoming integral components of military networks preparing for high-tech warfare. This is taking place via a string of research initiatives and expanding ties with military contractors, such as the new Lockheed Martin research centre at the University of Melbourne.

The creeping militarisation of universities is taking place behind the backs of students and staff, most of whom have no idea of its scale and implications.



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