

Claims of Chinese “hacking” add to US pressure on Australian government

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Reuters published an “exclusive” on Monday reporting that five unnamed sources “with direct knowledge” of the issue had said Morrison’s government knew that China conducted a hacking operation against the Australian parliament in February. The sources, which undoubtedly included Australian intelligence agencies, accused the government of keeping China’s involvement secret for fear of disrupting trade relations with Beijing.

The “scoop” was uncritically broadcast by the Australian and international corporate media just days before Prime Minister Scott Morrison makes a state visit to Washington at President Donald Trump’s invitation, during which the US confrontation with China will be a focus of discussion.

It was the second intervention by the intelligence apparatus in a week, following the anti-China witch-hunt surrounding Gladys Liu, a Chinese-born government member of parliament. According to media reports, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) warned the government on several occasions that Liu was an “agent of influence,” due to her association with China.

For now, Morrison has defended Liu against calls for her to be removed from parliament on the grounds of “allegiance to a foreign power.” However, the Reuters report adds to the pressure on the government in dealing with Liu’s case, which is the latest in a barrage of media claims of “Chinese interference” in Australia.

Significantly, the Labor Party, which is totally committed to the US military alliance, began this week’s sitting of parliament by moving to suspend question time and accusing Morrison of preventing Liu from making an explanation to parliament. The government used its narrow majority to block the debate, but Labor is continuing to agitate to force Lui to

address parliament to explain her past membership of alleged Chinese government-supported organisations and her fundraising from Chinese-Australian business people.

The Reuters report bears all the hallmarks of another political operation conducted from within Australia’s intelligence and military establishment, which is closely integrated with its US counterparts.

The five sources “declined to be identified due to the sensitivity of the issue.” They said the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD)—the country’s electronic surveillance and cyber warfare agency—concluded in March that China was responsible for a supposed cyber-attack on Australia’s parliament and the Liberal, National and Labor parties three months before the May 18 federal election.

At the time, Morrison seized upon the unsubstantiated “hacking” claims to try to whip up xenophobia, directed above all against China. “Our cyber experts believe that a sophisticated state actor is responsible for this malicious activity,” he said. Media reports immediately blamed Beijing, but Morrison declined to name China and conceded “there is no evidence of any electoral interference.”

As it did in February, China’s Foreign Ministry denied involvement in any hacking attacks. “When investigating and determining the nature of online incidents there must be full proof of the facts, otherwise it’s just creating rumours and smearing others, pinning labels on people indiscriminately,” the ministry said in a statement sent to Reuters.

The Reuters report is just as vague and unproven as the initial allegations in February. The “sources” declined to specify how hackers breached parliament’s security and said it was unclear when the attack had begun or how long hackers had access to the networks.

Supposedly, the attackers used sophisticated techniques to conceal their access and identity.

Even by these accounts, no classified information was accessed, just “policy papers” and email correspondence. Yet the ASD’s findings were shared with at least two allies, the US and Britain, and the British authorities “sent a small team of cyber experts to Canberra to help investigate the attack.”

Reuters reported that “two US diplomatic sources” said some American officials “have been frustrated by Australia’s reluctance to more publicly confront China.” This was despite the Australian government’s many actions against China, including banning the Chinese telecom firm Huawei from the country’s planned 5G network and imposing far-reaching, anti-democratic “foreign interference” legislation.

The “foreign interference” legislation, passed last year, provides a pseudo-legal pretext for outlawing opposition to pro-US militarism and the US alliance. Although the legislation has not been used for arrests yet, federal police raids have been conducted in recent months on whistleblowers and journalists accused of leaking documents relating to intelligence and military operations in support of US wars and war plans.

Clearly, however, this is not enough for Washington. Visiting Sydney last month for annual US-Australia ministerial talks, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a thinly veiled threat. “You can sell your soul for a pile of soybeans, or you can protect your people,” he told a media conference.

China is Australian capitalism’s largest trading partner, buying more than one-third of Australia’s total exports, mainly iron ore and coal. More than a million Chinese tourists and students are present in Australia each year, further boosting profits. Yet, the US dominates foreign investment in Australia and overseas investment by the Australian corporate elite, as well as the military and intelligence forces.

After the ministerial talks, the Morrison government agreed to send a warship to the Persian Gulf, where it could be in the middle of a US attack on Iran, which would also hit China’s large-scale investment in Iranian oilfields. But the Liberal-National government continued to decline requests from Washington to join provocative US “freedom of navigation operations” within the territorial waters claimed by China around its islets in the strategic South China Sea.

The “interference” accusations against China are manifestly hypocritical. The US has intervened repeatedly in Australian politics. Its hand was seen in the removal of Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2010 and Liberal-National Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last year. Both were regarded as unreliable because of their efforts to shore up lucrative relations with Beijing.

As for “spying,” WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange, and Edward Snowden, an ex-US National Security Agency employee, have documented the vast extent of US and allied surveillance operations, not only on rivals like China and Russia, but on millions of people around the world.

Australia is already closely tied to US military operations against China, including via the Pine Gap satellite communications facility, the stationing of US Marines in Darwin and the US-led “Five Eyes” global spy network.

Both the Liu and “hacking” affairs put pressure on the Australian government to accede to mounting demands from Washington for even greater Australian involvement in the Trump administration’s trade and economic offensive against China, as well as the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war.



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