

Australian establishment's anti-China campaign goes into overdrive

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Over the past week, the Australian political and media establishment has dramatically intensified a three-year campaign alleging that the country is under threat from pervasive “Chinese interference” in virtually every social, political and economic institution.

As in previous outpourings of anti-China hysteria, the statements emanating from politicians, intelligence chiefs and prominent media outlets have an orchestrated character.

They coincide with a ratcheting-up of denunciations of China by the US state apparatus and its media mouthpieces, which have been heavily involved in pushing for Australia to take an even more strident line against Beijing.

Senior US Democratic and Republican politicians have hypocritically condemned China over its repression of the mass protests in Hong Kong. Critics of Donald Trump within the US establishment have warned that the president has softened his bellicose rhetoric against Beijing.

The *New York Times* and other publications with close ties to the US intelligence agencies have launched a media campaign against China's attacks on the democratic rights of the Uighur minority, peddling unsubstantiated claims about the number of people detained by the regime and comparing its actions to those of Nazi Germany.

There is little doubt that the anti-China barrage in Australia is the result of consultations with, and substantial pressure from, the US military and intelligence establishment.

This is indicated by two developments that immediately preceded the current media campaign.

Steve Bannon, an anti-China hawk and a fascistic former advisor to Trump, was a featured speaker at the Australian Strategic Forum held at the beginning of last week.

Bannon declared: “People in Australia need to understand that as the thing [US-China rivalry] goes forward and it evolves from an information and economic war, it is going to be a kinetic [military] war.” He stated that Australians “need to understand that they are the absolute tip of the spear” in the aggressive US confrontation with China.

Just days later, Duncan Lewis, the former head of ASIO,

Australia's domestic spy agency, publicly warned of “unprecedented foreign interference” and asserted that China was seeking to “take over” Australian politics. ASIO and other state agencies have been a central conduit for Washington's demands for a hardline toward Beijing.

Immediately after Lewis' statements, the media campaign began. Last weekend, Nine Media publications unveiled Wang Liqiang, an alleged defector from Chinese intelligence, to whom they were given exclusive access by ASIO. Wang, who is accused by the Chinese government of being a convicted fraudster, told wild and evidence-free tales of global Chinese computer hacking operations and political interference schemes, spanning multiple continents.

Within days, Wang's story was called into question. An article in the *Australian* on Tuesday reported that a Chinese-language expert and two Korean-language experts had examined documents he presented, which they say contain inconsistencies.

The *Australian* noted that “Macquarie University China researcher Adam Ni expressed skepticism about Mr Wang's story, saying he appeared not to know the names of key Chinese institutions.”

Ni stated: “He's clearly someone who doesn't have a basic understanding of one of the most important PLA [People's Liberation Army] organisations, supposedly the organisation that the company he works for sits under.” The academic said that Wang's “claims and credibility should be seen with skepticism.

Wang claimed to have inside knowledge of a Chinese intelligence plot, publicly unveiled over the weekend, to cultivate Melbourne car dealer Bo “Nick” Zhao as an asset, and to help install him as a Liberal member of parliament. Nine Media claimed that Zhao, who was found dead in a hotel room last March, reported the approach to ASIO.

Andrew Hastie, the head of the joint parliamentary committee on intelligence, declared that Zhao's death was “chilling.” Peter Hartcher, the political and international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote: “[W]e are left with the impression that Australia's security agencies didn't

protect him [Zhao] terribly well.” Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that the events were “deeply disturbing.”

Days after these dark warnings, which clearly implied that Zhao had fallen victim to foul play at the hands of Chinese agencies, the *Australian* reported that police assessed that his death appeared to be the result of an accidental drug overdose.

Other lurid media stories, including claims that the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has been a particular target for infiltration, have proven to be similarly bogus. An article in the *Australian* claimed the organisation was so concerned with recent Chinese probes that it had established a committee to guard against foreign interference.

A statement by the CSIRO rejected these assertions and declared: “To single out China is disingenuous.” It noted that the committee referenced in the article had been established in 2001.

Despite the confected character of the stories, senior political figures have responded by calling for further measures to target “interference.”

The Labor Party has sought to outflank the government from the right. It has demanded that Liberal MP Gladys Liu, who is of Hong Kong Chinese origin, front a parliamentary inquiry to probe her connections to Beijing, and greater scrutiny of political donations to ensure that they are not a vehicle for “foreign interference.”

One of the chief purposes of the current campaign was revealed in an article by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which reported the national security agencies are frustrated that there have not been any prosecutions under the sweeping foreign interference laws passed year by the Coalition government and Labor last year. The article reported that “one senior figure” was heard to declare “We want a scalp.”

The ABC also cited Alex Joske of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-funded think tank which is intimately involved in the anti-China campaign. He “predicted” that “the next thing we’re going to be looking at is a prosecution.”

The foreign interference laws are among the most anti-democratic legislation enacted in Australia since World War Two. They contain sweeping powers to prosecute anyone with links to an organisation as a “foreign agent,” along with provisions targeting whistleblowers and investigative journalists.

The laws went hand-in-hand with the establishment of a registry for organisations with “foreign” links. Those on the register are subject to an intrusive inspection regime. An article in Nine Media outlets yesterday bemoaned the fact that of the 50 individuals and groups that had registered,

none had “any links to the Chinese government’s United Front Work Department.”

Malcolm Turnbull, the former prime minister who presided over the introduction of the legislation, weighed in yesterday, declaring that there was “not much point in having these laws and not enforcing them.”

The purpose of the legislation is to silence elements within the political and media establishment who have voiced concerns that Australia’s unconditional alignment with US aggression against China threatens lucrative economic and trade relationships.

It is also aimed at creating the conditions for the repression of mass anti-war sentiment, including through the proscription of Chinese organisations and anti-war groups. The statements bemoaning the failure of the authorities to use the laws follow worried reports by think-tanks with links to Washington that there is widespread scepticism among ordinary people in the US alliance.

The University of Sydney’s US Studies Centre, for instance, warned in June of a “gap” “between governmental perceptions of the challenges posed by China, and public opinion.” It stated: “In the absence of clear explanations of how Beijing’s actions threaten American and Australian values and interests, steps taken to mitigate those challenges will likely appear as either provocative or counter-productive.”

Both the foreign interference laws and the current media campaign are aimed at creating a political climate in which governments feel able to vastly expand militarist and anti-democratic policies. Prominent figures, such as former deputy secretary of defence Paul Dibb, have used it to call for a major build-up of the Australian armed forces, including the development of a missile shield, on the pretext of protecting the northern approach to the country from China.

The official attempts to whip-up a wartime atmosphere of nationalist hysteria are a warning of the advanced preparations for military conflict and for accompanying domestic repression. They underscore the fact that, without any public discussion, the Australian population has been placed on the frontlines of an aggressive US confrontation with China that threatens to unleash nuclear war.



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