Journalist Peter Hartcher and the anti-China campaign in Australia

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24 December 2019

For well over three years, a frenzied media campaign has been waged in Australia over alleged Chinese "interference" in the country's political affairs. Alarmist reports of purported "agents of influence" have been published, particularly by the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the former Fairfax, now Nine-owned *Sydney Morning Herald*, Melbourne *Age* and *Australian Financial Review*.

The portrayal of China as a threat has taken place along the steady growth of tensions between the Beijing regime and US imperialism and its allies. China is viewed in Washington as the greatest challenge to American global dominance. Under the Obama administration, the US launched what it called the "pivot to Asia," focussing the bulk of its air and naval power in the region and developing a series of alliances and bases that essentially encircle China. Under the Trump administration, a full-scale trade war has been launched to undermine the Chinese economy. US and Australian strategic and military documents openly discuss the prospect of war breaking out.

The political establishment, intelligence agencies and military in Australia have been increasingly integrated with Washington's aggressive confrontation with China. And the Australian media have been in the forefront of the anti-China propaganda campaign that is designed to condition public opinion for conflict.

Hartcher, the international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, has played a prominent role in promoting suspicion and hostility toward China. In September 2016, he was the author of an inflammatory article labelling those he accused of representing Chinese influence in Australia as "rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows." He directly named serving and retired Australian politicians, academics and university think tanks, businesspeople, and ethnic Chinese organisations and Chinese students as "Four Pests" that should be "eradicated."

Hartcher has subsequently kept up a drumbeat of provocative opinion pieces. He credits the media campaign with pressuring the Liberal-National Party Coalition government and Labor Party opposition to join forces in 2018 and legislate "foreign interference" laws. One piece of legislation illegalised a broad range of activity if it is conducted on behalf of, or in collaboration with, a "foreign principal." A second established the Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme (FITS), which obligates Australian organisations that operate under the direction or on behalf of a "foreign principal" to list themselves on a public register.

Last month, Hartcher authored a lengthy comment for the *Quarterly Essay*, an Australian political journal. Entitled "Red Flag: Waking Up To China's Challenge," the article is essentially a denunciation of what he views as the failure of Australian governments to use the legislation to prosecute alleged "agents of Chinese influence."

Hartcher begins his essay with a description of the "dreams" of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which, he asserts is seeking to use the country's development into the world's second largest economy to achieve "a magnificent restoration of China's sovereign splendour before it was torn apart by British, European and Japanese forces after 1842." He implies that current Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese ruling elite are inspired by the "Mandate of Heaven" advanced more than 2,000 years ago by the Zhou dynasty of Chinese emperors, who claimed a divine right to rule all China. He refers to Xi's China as striving for a "return to imperial-era greatness" and as operating in the "spirit of the once-mighty empire" and with "imperial-scale ambition."

Xi Jinping himself is presented as a ruthless, power-driven dictator/emperor, who "intends to be nothing less than a threshold figure in world history." The "China of Xi's dreams," Hartcher writes, is an "authoritarian superpower."

Whatever the dreams of the Chinese ruling class, American imperialism is determined to block their ambitions, by war if necessary. This stark reality is at the heart of a protracted foreign policy conflict within the Australian establishment. One wing has attempted to argue that Australia should distance itself from the US, on the grounds that China is the country's largest export market and trading partner. However, the dominant factions within the major political parties, the military/intelligence apparatus and the corporate elite have prevailed with their insistence that Australia must remain unconditionally allied with the Washington.

Hartcher supports the alignment of Australian imperialism with the United States in a descent toward a catastrophic military conflict with China—one which would risk rapidly escalating into an exchange of nuclear weapons. He does so by turning reality on its head. He portrays the US and its allies such as Australia as threatened by China, rather than Chinese regime being increasingly threatened by the US and its allies.

Hartcher cites some of the indices of Chinese economic growth over the past several decades, and its emergence as the largest trading partner of dozens of countries. Australia is one of the countries whose economic relations have been most transformed,

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in less than two decades. China has become the destination for over one third of its exports—mainly raw materials such as iron ore, coal and gas. Tens of billions of dollars are also earned through Chinese students studying at Australian universities and private colleges, and also via a booming tourist trade.

The Chinese regime, Hartcher contends, is seeking to exploit this economic factor to establish political control. He pays particular attention to China's ambitious and costly "Belt and Road" projects to finance improved land and maritime transport links between Asia and Europe—in part to lessen its dependence on US Navy-controlled sea lanes. This is presented as a plan to subjugate countries and entire regions to China's dictates.

Relying on various figures from the Australian and US establishment, Hartcher presents China as seeking to dominate Australia through a combination of large-scale investment and by establishing influence within political parties, the media and academia through donations and the activities of a pro-Beijing "Chinese diaspora."

Duncan Lewis—a former military commander, head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and government advisor—states: "Espionage and foreign interference is insidious. You wake up one day and final decisions [are] made in our country that are not in the interests of our country. Not only in politics but also in the community or in business. It takes over, basically, pulling the strings from offshore."

Hartcher also favourably quotes Steven Bannon, the one-time advisor to Donald Trump and American nationalist demagogue, who described Australia as the "canary in the mineshaft," that demonstrates the threat of Chinese expansionism. He cites American militarist and retired US admiral and US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris, who asserted that Australia was the "tip of the spear" in the "West's efforts to fight back against China's encroachments."

Hartcher gives examples of when the Chinese government has sought to intimidate other countries over foreign policy issues. In the case of Australia, he recounts extra checks on thermal coal exports and a "diplomatic freeze," imposed after Canberra proscribed Chinese company Huawei from participation in Australia's 5G network. He details the growth of China's conventional military strength and the resources it has committed to developing "cyberwarfare" and "asymmetric warfare" capabilities, such as hacking and critical computer networks that control everything from the financial system to electricity grids and communications.

His essay reprises his accusations that politicians, corporations, members of the ethnic Chinese community and Chinese students function as a fifth column of Beijing within Australia. He bitterly asks, "Why are the foreign interference laws not being enforced?" and demagogically compares it with the failure of governments to act on corruption in the banking and construction industries.

He writes: "It is worse than pointless for parliamentarians to pass fine laws, for politicians to make fine speeches, if the laws are not enforced. The foreign interference laws, themselves partly the result of a media exposés by the Fairfax newspapers in conjunction with the ABC, appear in danger of falling prey to exactly this national lacuna."

What Hartcher never does is to refer to the extensive "foreign interference" by Washington over decades in Australian politics—including its involvement in the ousting of two Labor prime ministers: Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010—as well as its close ties in academic, the media, the military, intelligence agencies and state apparatus.

Hartcher is himself very well connected in the US. He was foreign correspondent in Washington for the *Australian Financial Review* for three years, and is a longstanding member of the Australian American Leadership Dialogue—a private forum for top political and other figures to network behind closed doors. Among his writings are essays on Asia commissioned by the right-wing US journal, *The National Interest* .

It is no surprise that Hartcher's latest essay is, in summary, textbook propaganda for war. It seeks to cultivate nationalist fear and even paranoia about the intended enemy—China—within the Australian establishment and broader population. Having played a role in getting the foreign interference laws enacted, he now wants the wartime political atmosphere dramatically heightened.

Hartcher wants the Australian government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison to preside over a McCarthyite witch hunt in which people are persecuted and imprisoned for allegedly being "Chinese agents of influence." Just weeks after the publication of the *Quarterly Essay*, he made this explicit in a column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on December 3.

He wrote: "One test will be whether we see the foreign agents disclosure register filling with the names of people doing the work of foreign powers.…

"And the further test of actual enforcement will be whether we see arrests, prosecutions, deportations of people engaged in subversion and coercion that is occurring at 'unprecedented' levels, in the words of ASIO's annual report to Parliament.

"Australia cannot live with relentless Chinese government efforts to take control."

Hartcher's intended victims certainly includes a faction of the Australian ruling class itself, which opposes confrontation with China because it threatens immense corporate profits. The primary target of the purge advocated by Hartcher, however, will be socialist and anti-imperialist opponents of capitalism, nationalism and militarism, who fight for a perspective in the interests of the international working class.

Whether in Australia, the US or China, or anywhere else in the world, the working class has nothing to gain and everything to lose from the war drive unfolding before its eyes. Hartcher's answer to the prospect of a mass antiwar movement against the insanity of imperialist politics is state repression.

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