Australian police raids seized copies of Chinese diplomatic communications

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More revelations are appearing that point to what lay behind last week's sensationalised media reports that Chinese authorities had subjected two Australian journalists to midnight raids, forcing them to leave the country.

It is increasingly clear that this development was bound up with an escalating US-led offensive against China, in which both the Trump administration and the Australian government are taking extraordinarily provocative actions.

While Washington is taking unprecedented action to force the Chinese firm ByteDance to sell the video sharing app TikTok to an American company, Australia's Liberal-National government is orchestrating matching moves against Beijing.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported yesterday that Australian police agencies have at least twice this year accessed the communications of Chinese diplomats, in violation of international law, triggering a sharp deterioration in relations between the two governments.

Such material is protected by the Vienna conventions on diplomatic and consular relations, which are also enshrined in Australian law. But communications involving Chinese officials were seized in operations targeting John Zhang, a Chinese-Australian citizen who was a part-time electorate officer for a New South Wales (NSW) state Labor Party MP, Shaoquett Moselmane.

In January, at Sydney International Airport, Australian Border Force (ABF) officers searched Zhang's computers and phones when he, his wife and their daughter returned from lunar new year celebrations in China. According to Zhang, the officers read and copied email and phone exchanges with Chinese embassy and consular officials in Australia.

Zhang's devices were again accessed in June when Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officers raided his home, company and the NSW Parliament.

In a blaze of publicity, Moselmane was also raided before dawn on June 26—accused by various media outlets of being a "Chinese agent." Last week, Chinese authorities revealed that four Australian-based Chinese journalists were raided at the same time, and were told not to report the police operation. The journalists later left Australia.

As required by the ASIO Act, Attorney-General Christian Porter personally authorised the raids, exposing the involvement of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government at the highest levels.

The ABC reported it was told that Zhang's computers and phones contained a long history of emails, messages and records of calls with Chinese diplomatic and consular officials and some of their family members. They included the most recent Sydney consul-general, Gu Xiaojie, and officials and families at the senior ambassadorial level in Canberra.

Zhang last month wrote to Porter, Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, complaining of the unlawful downloading of these communications from his laptops and phones.

These developments indicate the degree to which the Australian government and its security agencies, working closely with their US counterparts, are ratcheting up moves designed to inflame tensions with China.

This is the context of last week's much-dramatised departure from China of the last two journalists there representing Australian media outlets—the ABC's Bill Birtles and the *Australian Financial Review's* Michael Smith. It seems to be the result of Australian government provocations.

The Australian Foreign Affairs Department, which would have known of the earlier secret operations against Zhang and the four Chinese journalists, had advised the pair to leave China. They were both booked on flights for the next day, when the Chinese authorities instructed them not to leave until they answered questions relating to a legal case.

The Australian embassy in Beijing then further intervened, hosting the two journalists in diplomatic residences for five days until a deal was worked out for them to speak to the Chinese police and then leave the country.

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If the Chinese embassy had taken similar action in response to June's raids on Chinese journalists, the corporate media would have been full of headlines accusing Beijing of blocking police and legal proceedings.

The latest revelations further underscore the sweeping scope of, and political agenda behind, the "foreign interference" laws jointly pushed through parliament in 2018 by the Liberal-National government and the opposition Labor Party, setting a global precedent hailed by the US political establishment.

The raids against Moselmane, Zhang and the Chinese journalists are seen as the first test of these laws, which the Australian government has been under US-linked pressureto put into practice.

Search warrants seen by the ABC reportedly show that the AFP is investigating whether China's Sydney Consul Sun Yantao worked "covertly" with Zhang to influence political opinion in Australia. That is an offence that carries up to 20 years' imprisonment under the foreign interference legislation.

The allegedly "covert" discussions consist of a discussion group on WeChat, which reportedly mostly consisted of sharing articles, speeches, jokes and memes, and to organise social outings. WeChat is used by millions of people around the world.

As a prominent figure in the Chinese-Australian community, Zhang has been far from "covert." He has made no secret of his relationships with China's embassy in Canberra and its Sydney consulate, and has boasted in media articles of his ties with Australia's political elite

One cited 2014 blog by Zhang indicates the type of "soft diplomacy" being practised by China, like every other country. Speaking of Moselmane, he wrote:

"Through these influential friends in Western society, China's social and economic development is better understood and China's cultural values are better accepted." Zhang expressed the hope that "the gap between East and West will gradually disappear."

Instead, however, first under Obama and then Trump, Washington has intensified its military and economic confrontation, seeking to prevent China from ever challenging the hegemony over the Asia-Pacific and much of the globe established by the US through World War II.

No doubt, whatever activities the Chinese embassy conducts pale into insignificance compared to those of the US embassy. It has intervened to overturn at least two Australian governments—those of prime ministers Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Kevin Rudd in 2010—that were regarded as insufficiently reliable in implementing the US alliance.

The US embassy's collaboration with "protected sources" in the Labor Party to oust Rudd was documented by leaked US cables published by WikiLeaks. Once Julia Gillard was installed as prime minister, she aligned the country completely behind the Obama administration's anti-China "pivot to Asia."

Moselmane and Zhang have been accused of making pro-China statements and of criticising the foreign interference laws as part of an anti-China witch hunt. To make such political views a crime is an outright assault on free speech.

Zhang has launched a High Court challenge, exposing the nebulous nature of the accusations hurled against him and charging the government and ASIO with violating the implied freedom of political communication in the Australian constitution.

Interviewed on national television last Sunday, Home Affairs Minister Dutton took the threat to freedom of speech further. He said any foreign journalists in the country who provided a "slanted view" of Australian affairs might come under similar scrutiny from the security agencies.

The initial targets of these police raids may be figures linked to China but they will not be the last. Already, media reports have described former foreign minister and NSW premier Bob Carr as a "mentor" of Moselmane. Even those in the political establishment, like Carr, can be victimised if they differ with the ferocity of the anti-China drive because it affects the lucrative profits that sections of the ruling class derive from iron ore and other exports to China.

Beyond that, anti-war opposition and political dissent can be criminalised, as part of a drive to whip up a poisonous wartime-like atmosphere. As the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have warned, the foreign interference laws contain sweeping offences, ranging from treason to breaching official secrecy and cooperating with a "foreign" organisation. These provisions could be used to outlaw opposing Australian involvement in a catastrophic US-led war against China.

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