

Australia's spy agency drums up wartime atmosphere

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21 March 2021

Mirroring the Biden administration's escalation of accusations and provocations against China, Australia's domestic spy chief last week declared that "espionage and foreign interference" by hostile governments would replace terrorism as the country's greatest security threat by 2025.

In an "exclusive" front-page interview with the Murdoch media's *Australian*, Mike Burgess, the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) gave what the newspaper called "a stark assessment of global strategic conflict, primarily competition between the US and China."

Given that ASIO's latest annual "threat assessment," issued a few days earlier, had said the "terrorist threat remains at PROBABLE," Burgess's interview was intended to create an atmosphere of imminent war dangers and preparations. "Probable," he said, "means people would lose their lives" but the foreign threat would soon exceed that risk and "the level of activity coming at us and against us will be relentless."

In his earlier "threat assessment" presentation, Burgess claimed that ASIO had cracked a major spy network that had recruited a government official with access to classified defence technology, in what ASIO described as a "nest of spies."

Briefed by ASIO and its partners, the *Australian* said: "Security sources had confirmed the country behind the spy ring was not China, but senior operatives in the intelligence community strongly speculated that Russia, which has long seen Australia as a backdoor to gathering intelligence on the US, was the nation state in question."

In his interview, Burgess highlighted an alleged threat to critical infrastructure, which he said had not been previously reported publicly. He claimed that there was a danger involving the pre-planting of undetected

malicious software into critical infrastructure, which could be activated at a later date to cripple power grids, phone networks, water supplies and other economic and military assets.

"If tensions don't reduce—and it is a competitive world out there, so that competition is heating up—we do have to turn our mind to it, and we are concerned about the pre-placement of sabotage," Burgess told the *Australian*.

Such unsubstantiated allegations dovetail with the US-instigated bans imposed by Australia and other American allies on Huawei and other Chinese telecommunications companies, and with the blocking of practically all investment by Chinese or Hong Kong-based companies in Australian facilities.

Burgess's media performance came on the heels of this month's prediction by the head of the US Indo-Pacific command, Admiral Philip Davidson, that the US could face war with China over Taiwan within five years. The ASIO chief's intervention followed the first leaders' summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, an alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia against China.

Burgess's remarks also coincided with a declaration by the Biden administration that it would not tolerate China applying "economic coercion" to Australia, adding that accusation to Washington's long list of supposed crimes being committed by Beijing.

That allegation, reiterated by Biden's top foreign policy officials during their aggressive confrontation with their Chinese counterparts in Alaska last Friday, places Australia's population even more on the frontline of any catastrophic US war against China.

Yet, the charge of "economic coercion" flies in the face of the record. Chinese steel mills are continuing to buy Australian iron ore at massive levels and high

prices, further inflating the fortunes of Australian iron ore magnates like Gina Rinehart, Andrew Forrest and Clive Palmer.

Moreover, it is the US, supported by Australia, that is waging economic warfare against China. The Biden administration has not lifted any of the punitive tariffs and other penalties imposed under Trump on Chinese exports, investment and corporations.

Australia's Huawei ban was one of 14 grievances against Australia issued by the Chinese government last November. The list also included the blocking of 10 Chinese investment proposals across infrastructure, agriculture and animal husbandry sectors, ASIO and police raids on Chinese journalists and academic visa cancellations, and "spearheading a crusade" in multilateral forums targeting China's affairs in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

In his "threat assessment" speech, delivered at ASIO's headquarters on March 17, Burgess highlighted the agency's aggressive use of the "foreign interference" laws passed in 2018 amid a media scare campaign, fuelled by ASIO, against alleged Chinese "interference" in Australian politics. He said the ASIO-Australian Federal Police Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce had investigated over 30 cases, and laid the first foreign interference criminal charges late last year.

"Prosecutions are only one weapon," Burgess emphasised. "Our advice helped Home Affairs deny and cancel a number of visas. And often, merely questioning a spy or their proxy is enough to make them pack up and flee the country, because they know their cover is blown."

Late last year, Burgess noted, "parliament passed legislation allowing us to be more flexible in our use of less intrusive tracking devices, and to compel suspected spies to attend interviews." That legislation allows ASIO to secretly interrogate teenagers as young as 14, rather than 16, and extends ASIO's coercive questioning powers beyond alleged terrorism-related activity to suspected "foreign interference," "espionage" and "politically-motivated violence."

Burgess reported that ASIO was already using those police-state powers, which the opposition Labor Party backed, and would ask for new powers and resources when it needed them.

Significantly, Burgess foreshadowed demands for further measures to combat the use of encryption for

privacy and political reasons. He claimed that in the past year alone the proportion of ASIO's "intelligence coverage" in "priority counter-terrorism cases" that had been "damaged" by end-to-end encryption on internet communications platforms had risen from 90 to 97 percent.

The continual expansion of police and spy agency powers on the pretext of countering foreign "enemies" is a warning that the drive toward war will be accompanied, as in World War I and II, with increased suppression of working class discontent, directed particularly against socialists.



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