

Australian “foreign interference” arrest of businessman linked to China

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In timing that hardly seems accidental, Australian police and intelligence agencies dramatically arrested a Sydney businessman last Friday. He has been charged with providing unspecified defence, economic or national security information to two alleged Chinese intelligence agents who, according to the police, had posed as Chinese think tank representatives.

Much remains unclear about the allegations against Alexander Csergo, 55, a publicly-advertised corporate consultant in Shanghai, China’s commercial capital. Several months after returning to Australia to visit his elderly mother, he was arrested at her home in Bondi, an inner Sydney suburb.

What is clear is that the arrest—police video footage of which was splashed all over the media—occurred amid escalating moves by the Biden administration to militarily and economically confront China, which Washington has identified as the existential threat to American global dominance.

Last month, the Albanese Labor government further ramped up the bipartisan commitment to the US offensive against China by unveiling plans to spend \$368 billion on US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines, clearly designed for use against China.

There has been a barrage of articles in the corporate media, such as the Nine network’s “Red Alert” series, proclaiming the necessity for the population to get ready for a war against China within three years, reflecting timelines outlined by top US military commanders.

Csergo’s is the first arrest conducted by the Labor government under the sweeping “foreign interference” legislation passed by the previous Liberal-National government, with Labor’s backing, in 2018. It is only the second arrest under these laws, whose introduction was accompanied by massive scare campaigns about alleged Chinese political interference in Australia.

Significantly, Csergo has not been accused of deliberately “selling Australian defence and security secrets to foreign spies,” as prejudicial front-page media headlines and articles claimed. Rather, he been charged with providing information while “reckless as to whether the conduct would support intelligence activities of a foreign principal.”

Under the federal Criminal Code, “reckless” does not require intent to harm Australia’s defence or national security or assist

a foreign country. It just means being “aware of” a “substantial” and “unjustifiable” risk that one’s conduct will do so.

Despite their vagueness and sweeping character, “reckless” foreign interference charges still carry heavy penalties, up to 15 years’ imprisonment. Conscious spying offences, such as espionage, have punishments of up to life imprisonment.

After a brief video-link hearing on Saturday, Csergo was held in custody over the weekend and was due to apply for bail on Monday.

Friday’s much-publicised arrest was conducted by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) after what was described as an investigation by the Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce, a joint operation between the AFP and the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Both agencies have decades-long records of frame-ups and harassment of government opponents.

AFP Assistant Commissioner Krissy Barrett told a media conference that two alleged Chinese intelligence agents, referred to as “Ken and Evelyn,” offered Csergo “money to obtain information about Australian defence, economic and national security arrangements, plus matters relating to other countries.”

Barrett provided no details about the money, information or “other countries” involved. Under the 2018 legislation, “national security” is defined very broadly. It includes Australia’s “political, military or economic relations with another country or other countries.”

The charges against Csergo accuse him of unspecified “covert and involved deception,” yet he has been very public about his business activities in China. On his LinkedIn account, he describes himself as a “multi award-winning integrated communications, technology infrastructure, business strategy & operational transformation specialist” with expertise in “large scale data,” “predictive analytics” and artificial intelligence.

Moreover, it seems that Csergo has worked for major corporations, both in Australia and China. From media reports, he is the president of global innovation and transformation at Conversys, a digital solutions company headquartered in Shanghai.

The company’s website says Csergo has worked for large

companies, including Daimler, BMW, Jaguar Land Rover, Audi and Volkswagen Group China, and won 40 international awards for his work. The website says Conversys has previously worked with Australian telcos Optus and Telstra. Media reports in 2014 noted that Csergo was hired by luxury cosmetics firm Estee Lauder to improve their market presence in China.

In a statement, the AFP alleged that Csergo had been approached via social media by an unnamed individual who claimed to be from a think tank. Csergo allegedly met that person's two representatives, who "work for a foreign intelligence service and are undertaking intelligence collection activities." The statement accused him of compiling a "number of reports" for the individuals and receiving payment for those reports.

The AFP statement insinuated that Csergo had committed serious crimes against the country. "Espionage and foreign interference pose a serious threat to Australia's sovereignty, security and the integrity of our national institutions," it said.

The previous person subjected to a police raid and arrest under the foreign interference legislation, Di Sanh Duong, 67, has been before the courts in Melbourne for more than two years. Duong, a long-time prominent Vietnamese-Chinese member of the Liberal Party, and former party election candidate, was accused in November 2020 of an even vaguer offence, that of "preparing" for an act of foreign interference, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years.

Police claimed that a \$37,000 donation Duong made to the Royal Melbourne Hospital to help with coronavirus research and preparation was designed to curry favour with then Coalition minister Alan Tudge so Duong could seek to influence government policy to benefit the Chinese government. Duong has denied the charge.

Duong's prosecution was presented by the corporate media, in both Australia and the United States, as a test case for the "foreign interference" legislation. Washington had welcomed the laws as a model for its own anti-China laws.

As the US business publication *Bloomberg* reported at the time: "Australia is set to become the first developed country to pass sweeping laws against foreign interference, in a move aimed at reducing Chinese meddling in national affairs and seen as the inspiration for legislation introduced in the US Congress."

Several months earlier, in June 2020, similar AFP-ASIO raids were conducted against the home and parliamentary office of New South Wales state Labor Party parliamentarian Shaoquett Moselmane, accompanied by lurid media headlines accusing him of being a Chinese Communist Party agent.

Labor's state and federal leadership supported the raids and forced Moselmane to take leave from parliament, yet no charges have been laid. The only publicly-released evidence against Moselmane was that he had visited China and had made statements praising the Chinese response to the coronavirus,

and criticising US provocations targeting Beijing.

All the circumstances of these cases point to high-level decisions to step up the official and media accusations against China, and to send threatening messages to anyone, even within the business and political elite, with links to China or who does not line up sufficiently against Beijing.

As the WSWS has documented and explained, the "foreign interference" laws do not only target China and its alleged local sympathisers. They can be used to outlaw political opposition, anti-war dissent and social protests by alleging that these are connected to "foreign" or international campaigns.

The legislation created seven new far-reaching offences and also expanded an array of existing offences, such as treason, sabotage, advocating mutiny and breaching official secrecy, to broaden their potential use to criminalise anti-war advocacy and activity. The laws also can be used to illegalise the activities of publishers and whistleblowers who expose war crimes and government wrongdoing.

The WSWS warned the legislation constitutes a sweeping attack on democratic rights. Never before has it been a crime to work with an overseas group or individual to seek political change, whether on issues relating to war, the environment, refugees or social inequality, or to undertake any globally-connected activity that harms the profits and predatory interventions of the Australian ruling class and its US partners.

While targeting China, these measures are part of preparations to suppress the rapidly developing struggles of the Australian and global working class under conditions of an economic and social crisis, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-rising danger of a catastrophic US-instigated war.



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