New Zealand intelligence report targets China over “foreign interference”

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New Zealand’s spy agency, the Security Intelligence Service (SIS), has published its first unclassified national threat assessment. It alleges that amid rising tensions and geopolitical competition, the country is threatened by “foreign intelligence agencies who persistently and opportunistically conduct espionage operations against New Zealand.”

To combat this, SIS Director Andrew Hampton called on “New Zealand businesses, institutions and communities [to] use this document to help them make informed decisions about risk and mitigation.” He declared that “we all have a role to play to protect our national security and each other’s wellbeing.” In other words, the agency is urging people to spy on employees, workmates, neighbours and friends for any signs of unpatriotic behaviour.

New Zealand’s Security Threat Environment 2023, released on August 11, follows the recent release of the first part of the Labour government’s Defence Policy Review and inaugural National Security Strategy. Taken together, these documents signal a major strengthening of New Zealand’s alignment with the US-led military and intelligence build-up to war against China.

The latest document points to “increased strategic competition” in the Indo-Pacific as motivating interference from China. Beijing’s “efforts to advance its political, economic, military and security involvement in the Pacific is a major factor driving strategic competition in our home region,” it says. In fact, the opposite is the case—the region is dominated by intensified US efforts to provoke a conflict with China which Washington views as the main obstacle to its imperialist hegemony.

The SIS baldly identifies as the major intelligence threat “the activities of three states in particular: the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia.” It focuses on purported interference by the Chinese intelligence agencies, which are accused of “ongoing activity in and against New Zealand and our home region.”

The report consists of sweeping generalisations and uses menacing language to create an air of anxiety and intimidation. One reads, for example, of unnamed states seeking to “further their advantage” through intelligence activities that include “human and cyber-enabled foreign interference and espionage, seeding disinformation, and the use of economic coercion, among other methods.”

Russia is singled out due to its “illegal” invasion of Ukraine and challenge to “international norms”—i.e., the rules established by the US that ensure its own imperialist domination. The SIS claims Russia is “seeking to interfere in international support for Ukraine through coercive measures and leveraging its dominance in energy markets.”

There is, of course, no criticism of NATO’s expansionist aims or its instigation of the 2014 coup in Ukraine and other provocations that sparked the war with Russia. The aim of US imperialism is to inflict a military defeat against Russia as a first step in the redivision of the world, which includes far-advanced plans for war with China.

No concrete details or substantive evidence is provided to back up any of the report’s sweeping claims.

According to the SIS, a growing proportion of cyber incidents affecting major NZ institutions are linked to “state-sponsored actors.” Of 350 reported incidents, none of which are documented, 118 were allegedly connected to foreign states.

The agency claims that foreign states are engaging in “societal interference,” such as attempting “to influence, disrupt or subvert New Zealand’s communities and non-government sectors by deceptive, corruptive or coercive means. This includes New Zealand’s academic sector—encompassing institutions, employees and students.” Students and academics who develop views deemed “subversive” by the state may find themselves accused of being agents of foreign interference.

Iran is accused of reporting on New Zealand’s Iranian communities and dissident groups, while according to the assessment: “Most notable is the continued targeting of New Zealand’s diverse ethnic Chinese communities. We see these activities carried out by groups and individuals linked to the intelligence arm of the People’s Republic of China.”

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This accusation, again unsubstantiated, dovetails with an escalating anti-China propaganda campaign, with the pro-Labour *Daily Blog*, among others, regularly accusing the country's Chinese community of being potential "fifth columnists" as social and economic tensions intensify.

China's ambassador to NZ, Wang Xiaolong, denied all the charges, declaring in a statement, "we NEVER interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Period."

The entire SIS document is drenched in hypocrisy. The most significant player interfering globally in the affairs of other countries—rivals and allies alike—is not China but the United States. Washington is currently escalating a raft of diplomatic, financial and military interventions across the Pacific, including an open threat of "regime change" in the Solomon Islands, to push back against Beijing.

In New Zealand, following the inconclusive 2017 election, the then US ambassador Scott Brown gave three extraordinary media interviews indicating Washington's preference for a Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition government, which the Trump administration believed would take a tougher line against Beijing than the incumbent National Party. After Brown's intervention, Labour took office with anti-Asian NZ First leader Winston Peters installed as foreign minister.

New Zealand remains regarded in Washington as insufficiently reliable in the stand-off with Beijing due to the Labour government's efforts to maintain critically important trading relations with China. A recent visit to Wellington by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken followed a stream of high-powered official visits over the past year, escalating pressure to further integrate New Zealand into US-led military preparations.

A major obstacle to the ruling elites' war drive is deeply entrenched opposition to war in the working class, as well as increasing anti-capitalist sentiment.

The SIS expresses nervousness about the emergence of popular opposition to the established order, noting "attempts to drive social changes are becoming… commonplace." It refers to growing distrust for institutions, fuelled by "perceptions that people are being deliberately lied to and misled; that those with power don't have New Zealand's best interests at heart; and that politicians are incapable of solving the problems facing the country."

Social and economic inequalities, the report declares, are among the many factors that "we expect to contribute to the radicalisation of violent extremists in New Zealand."

The report expresses concern that "state-generated misinformation" and disinformation is "consumed" by New Zealanders. This information "often references political and security-related events overseas to exploit pre-existing differences in society and is generated and disseminated to discredit competing world views and values."

Significantly, the spy agency declares that foreign states "may try to leverage significant social tensions or disagreements in society to their advantage. There could be attempts to cultivate political and social movements" in order to influence policy.

What this means is that, as was the case during the First and Second World Wars, the growth of socialist and antiwar movements against the government will be denounced as "extremism" caused by "enemy" propaganda and interference.

What counts as "extremism" is determined by the state. New Zealand's intelligence agencies and police failed to prevent the country's worst terrorist atrocity, the 2019 attack on two mosques in Christchurch by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant. For many years, since the previous Labour government joined the illegal US invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, the SIS and other state agencies routinely spied on and harassed Muslims while turning a blind eye to right-wing extremists including Tarrant and the groups with which he associated.

The deaths of the 51 victims were used by the Jacinda Ardern-led Labour government to advance stricter procedures for firearms licence applications and to promote more internet censorship mechanisms and greater resources for the intelligence agencies themselves.

The SIS security assessment should be taken as a sharp warning by the working class. New Zealand's state agencies, military and political elite are gearing up for what would inevitably be a calamitous war with China, coupled with a crackdown on any struggles by working people over declining living standards. Such developments erupting elsewhere around the globe, including in the United States and France, will assert themselves in New Zealand.

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