

Australian government, media downplay reports of Indian spy ring

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The corporate media has responded with striking indifference to reports that an Indian spy ring was identified in Australia in 2020 with some of its members expelled from the country. The federal Labor government has similarly refused to comment on the allegations, which were made in an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) article last week and in the *Washington Post*.

The ABC story was based on the statements of unnamed Australian officials. As with all such reports, it must be treated critically.

The indifference of the official media to the accusations, however, does not stem from such journalistic principles of caution.

For the best part of a decade, the population has been bombarded with lurid stories in the press, alleging widespread “foreign interference” in Australian politics and virtually every area of civil society. The target of these media campaigns, which are never backed up by evidence, has generally been China, but also other US adversaries such as Russia.

The media hysteria has accompanied and justified a repressive legislative framework. In 2018, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition came together to pass far-reaching “foreign interference” laws. The legislation could be used to target not only those accused of working for a foreign intelligence service, but participants in internationally-coordinated political activity, such as anti-war organising.

The muted reaction to the allegations of Indian spying exposes the politically-motivated character of this whole framework. It has been developed as a component of Australia’s integration into the US-led drive to war against China. Because India is also a participant in this war drive, the alleged spying activities are being swept under the rug.

The ABC stated that Australian “national security

figures” had confirmed that a 2020 spy ring operating in Australia was of India’s notorious foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

In his annual 2021 address, Mike Burgess, director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had declared that the domestic spy agency had disrupted a “nest of spies.” Burgess has made similar comments each year since, deliberately fuelling the anti-China atmosphere.

According to the ABC, however, the “nest of spies” was a team from the RAW. Burgess, without identifying any country, had claimed the group “developed targeted relationships with current and former politicians, a foreign embassy and a state police service.” They had “tried to obtain classified information about Australia’s trade relationships. They asked a public servant to provide information on security protocols at a major airport.” The ASIO boss had also alleged that the ring “monitored their country’s diaspora community.”

Burgess had oddly stated that the spy ring came from a country outside Australia’s region. This seemed to rule out China, but fuelled baseless speculation that Russia or some other US adversary were behind the operation. India is plainly in the Indo-Pacific region.

Both the ABC and the *Washington Post* reported that two members of India’s RAW were expelled from Australia after the ring was discovered in 2020.

In addition to the muted response to the revelations now, their delay is also striking. Were China behind the alleged spy ring, there is little doubt that the information would have been leaked to the press years ago, with front-page stories warning that Australia was under assault. Purported Chinese espionage, never proven, has previously been described in the press and by national security officials as approaching an act of war, which they term “greyzone warfare.”

The motives for hushing up the expulsion of RAW spies

are clear. At the time and since, Australian governments have significantly deepened relations with India, under the rubric of Washington's aggressive military build-up targeting China.

Ties have been expanded further by the current Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. In March, 2023, Albanese visited India and designated it a "top-tier strategic partner." That provides for expanded defence cooperation, including presumably intelligence sharing. It has been accompanied by larger joint military exercises than ever before.

During that visit, Albanese closely identified himself with Narendra Modi, including by riding around a cricket stadium with the Indian prime minister in a car decked out as a chariot. Then, when Modi visited Australia in May 2023, Albanese put on a stadium event for him in Sydney. With thousands of far-right Modi supporters chanting for him, Albanese hailed the Indian leader a "rockstar."

Modi is a fascistic figure, whose rule has been dubbed an "electoral autocracy" by some civil rights groups. He has instigated frame-ups of opposition politicians, while cracking down on democratic rights. This has particularly involved the promotion of Hindu chauvinist communalism directed against India's Muslim and Sikh minorities.

During a joint press conference in Australia, Modi declared that Albanese had pledged to "deal with" purported extremists within the Indian diaspora. This was part of a vicious campaign by the Indian regime, including the RAW, against Sikh separatists campaigning for an independent state in the Punjab region. Albanese did not contradict Modi.

A month later, in June 2023, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Canadian Sikh activist, was assassinated in British Columbia. Canadian authorities later publicly accused the RAW of carrying out the hit. A similar plot was allegedly foiled in New York.

Notably, Sikh activists in Australia have told the media that they have been monitored in Australia by the RAW. They have also claimed to have been approached by ASIO officers, who have wanted to discuss the spying.

The belated disclosure of the RAW operation in Australia appears to be part of a conversation in the US-aligned imperialist centres. There are concerns that the Modi regime's illegal activities risk causing scandals that could undermine the US-led war drive against China, and provoke domestic political anger. This week, three Indian nationals were charged by Canada over the murder of Nijjar.

There is no suggestion, however, that the major powers will take any action against Modi, or deviate from their partnership with him. Australian Treasurer Jim Chalmers, asked about the revelations, said he did not "want to go into those kind of operational issues." He added: "We've got a good relationship with India and with other countries in the region, it's an important economic relationship, it's become closer in recent years as a consequence of efforts on both sides, and that's a good thing."

The episode again underscores the bogus and thoroughly hypocritical character of imperialist invocations of "human rights" and "democracy" directed at adversaries such as China and Russia.

The other aspect of the ABC report that has received virtually no comment was its statement that other Australian allies were also carrying out espionage operations in the country.

Buried three quarters of the way through the article, the ABC matter-of-factly states: "Government sources have told the ABC that friendly nations believed to be particularly active with espionage operations in Australia include Singapore, South Korea, Israel and India."

That underscores a reality that is always buried in the media hysteria over purported Chinese interference, namely that all large-scale nation-states conduct spying and espionage activities, both against adversaries and allies.

The reference to Israeli intelligence activity is particularly notable. For the past seven months, as the Australian government has backed Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, it, together with the corporate media, has slandered mass opposition as antisemitic. The brief ABC mention of Israeli espionage underscores the likelihood that this Zionist propaganda offensive has included direct participation from Israeli spy agencies.



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