

Ex-US pilot in Australia faces extradition to face trumped-up charges of assisting China

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The Australian Labor government and the country's intelligence agencies are deeply involved in a bid by the US authorities to extradite Daniel Duggan, a former US Marine pilot, to face dubious charges of training Chinese military pilots that could see him jailed for 65 years.

On May 24, a Sydney magistrate declared that Duggan, an Australian citizen since 2012, could be legally extradited to the US, pending a final go ahead by Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus, who initially approved the extradition proceedings in 2022 despite obvious defects in the case.

The magistrate, Daniel Reiss, told the court Duggan was “eligible for surrender” to the US and ordered that he be kept in prison. Duggan has been incarcerated in maximum security cells, in solitary confinement, classified as a “high-risk inmate,” for more than 20 months.

Duggan's wife Saffrine and their six children are conducting a determined campaign for his freedom, but the US and Australian governments are pressing ahead, regardless of the trumped-up character of the case.

The charges against Duggan, issued by the US government in 2017, accuse him of conspiring with seven others to teach Chinese military pilots to land on aircraft carriers. He is also charged with money laundering and violating a US embargo on US citizens exporting military services to China.

Both Duggan and the Test Flying Academy of South Africa (TFASA) for whom he worked as a contractor back in 2010 to 2012, deny the allegations. They point out that no aircraft carriers existed in South Africa and that pilots learned how to slow aircraft to almost stalling point as a necessary approach and landing technique.

A TFASA spokesperson told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) “Background Briefing” program: “TFASA has never provided operational training to land on a ship, nor would such training have been possible in South Africa. The Field Carrier Landing Practice is a well-known exercise that enables students to gain precision handling experience.”

Moreover, the charges date back to more than a decade ago, when working with Chinese-connected businesses was

not prohibited by US law. That was before the Obama administration switched US policy on China, declaring a military and strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, setting in motion the escalating US economic and military offensive against China.

Two recent developments confirm that Duggan has become a political victim of escalating preparations by the US and its allies, including the Albanese government, for a war against China to assert American global hegemony.

On June 5, the US-led Five Eyes global surveillance and intelligence network, which includes Australia, the UK, Canada and New Zealand, issued a rare public bulletin. It explicitly cited Duggan's case as an example of a worldwide operation to counter alleged Chinese government's attempts to recruit Western pilots.

Directly prejudicing any prospect of a fair trial for Duggan, the bulletin stated: “In 2022, a former U.S. Marine pilot on contract with TFASA was arrested in Australia pursuant to a U.S. indictment charging him with violating the U.S. Arms Export Control Act.”

In the bulletin, a senior White House official, Michael Casey, the director of the US National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC), which is part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accused China of using undercover means to covertly recruit ex-Western military personnel.

Reuters reported that an NCSC official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Western pilots had been lured into training Chinese pilots by nefarious means, involving “tons of money” and opportunities “to fly really exotic” Chinese aircraft.

Duggan's prosecution has become a test case for wider allegations and actions against China and anyone accused of links to China. The official said the Chinese military had recruited at least five former pilots from New Zealand and some 30 from Britain, as well as former pilots from Germany and other countries.

That broadens the known scope of the operation in which Duggan has become entangled. Around the time that he was

first suddenly arrested in 2022, the UK government announced it would be investigating 30 former military pilots, and Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said he would consider taking similar action.

The other recent development was the revelation by Duggan, first reported in May, that he was approached by officers from Australia's domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and the US Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) at a hotel in Hobart in 2012 to gather information against China during planned employment there.

Far from being warned about the possible consequences of such work, Duggan was urged to go ahead. He told last week's "Background Briefing" program that the ASIO agent said: "We don't want to interfere in your business in China—good luck, make money and if you can meet any Chinese generals, we can do business."

Duggan said he left that meeting with the understanding that ASIO wanted him to be a human intelligence source in China.

ASIO then lured Duggan back to Australia in 2022 to be detained. Duggan was running an aviation consultancy in the Chinese city of Qingdao when he received a message to return to Australia because ASIO had provided him with clearance for an Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) card, which opened up avenues for working as a pilot in Australia.

When Duggan returned from China, he discovered the security clearance was no longer on offer. Instead, days later, Australian Federal Police officers arrested him.

Duggan lodged a March 2023 complaint against ASIO with the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS), an agency that supposedly monitors the conduct of the security agencies. However, ASIO director-general Mike Burgess declared a year later that the IGIS report, which remains classified, had absolved his agency.

In the meantime, in February 2023, Burgess sought to blackguard Duggan. Delivering ASIO's annual threat assessment, Burgess denounced unnamed ex-military personnel whom he accused of "transferring highly sensitive, privileged and classified know-how to foreign governments." His reference to Duggan was unmistakable. Burgess declared: "These individuals are lackeys, more 'top tools' than 'top guns'. Selling our warfighting skills is no different to selling our secrets."

The intent of the two governments to persecute Duggan was underscored last December. The New South Wales Supreme Court dismissed a bid by Duggan's lawyers to prevent the Australian Federal Police, acting at the behest of the US government, from seizing a property owned by Saffrine, which she had placed on the market to help pay the

huge cost of the legal proceedings.

That property seizure has left the family facing serious financial difficulties. Saffrine told the ABC she believes the US is trying to make an example out of her husband. "They want to scare people. To say, we don't want you to have anything to do with China."

The 1976 extradition treaty between the US and Australia prohibits extradition when the foreign offence involved is not a domestic crime, which it is not, and when the charges are political in nature. However, in 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard amended Australia's extradition laws, removing several safeguards against extradition for political offences.

Those alterations were directed against the persecuted Australian citizen and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, to facilitate his removal to the US if he came back to Australia, but now threaten Duggan.

The Albanese government's complicity in the pursuit of Duggan is on a par with its prosecution and jailing of former military lawyer David McBride for helping to expose war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan.

Both cases demonstrate that Labor's role in securing a plea deal for Assange, as a result of the massive global support for Assange and his crucial part in exposing war crimes and abuses by the US and its allies, has not at all lessened its readiness to trample over basic legal and democratic rights as part of its intensifying commitment to US militarism.

McBride's sentence and the ongoing pursuit of Duggan underline the need for a struggle, in Australia and worldwide, against the onslaught on democratic rights, the US-led imperialist war drive with which it is inseparably connected, and the capitalist system itself.



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