

Australian intelligence review calls for “urgent” powers for crises, war and political unrest

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On the eve of a looming federal election, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last Friday released a redacted version of an official review that his Labor government initiated in 2023 of the country’s sprawling network of spy and surveillance agencies.

After sitting on the report without explanation for eight months since it was completed, the government chose to publish this carefully censored version just before the election, which must be held by May 17.

Starkly, the report demands greater powers and resources for the so-called National Intelligence Community (NIC) to deal with political crises triggered by what it calls the “collapse of the post-Cold War” global order.

“It is not yet clear what will take its place, but for the foreseeable future Australia faces a world shaped by competition between nation-states and global geopolitical and economic fragmentation,” the review states.

Written by two former intelligence chiefs, Heather Smith and Richard Maude, the report speaks of the possibility of catastrophic wars. It says “major-power conflict is no longer unimaginable.”

The report declares the necessity for the 10 NIC agencies, headed by the US-style Office of National Intelligence (ONI), to be bolstered and prepared for rising global conflicts, especially a potential US war with China, and threats to “social cohesion” within Australia.

The report unequivocally aligns the Australian intelligence apparatus behind the US drive, now escalated by the Trump administration’s trade war measures, to reassert its global post-World War II hegemony against the perceived threat of China.

Turning the world situation on its head, the review blames China, not the US, for the aggression. It centrally targets China, accusing it of working with Russia “to weaken the global influence of the United States and the West more broadly.”

The report was released amid mounting calls in the corporate, political and media establishment for a vast expansion of military spending, combined with alarm that high levels of domestic political disaffection are likely to produce an unstable hung parliament in the election, with neither Labor nor the

Liberal-National Coalition able to form a majority government.

At the same time, the report voices underlying concerns about the historic crisis confronting the Australian ruling class, which has depended since World War II on the US military alliance to pursue its own predatory activities across the Indo-Pacific, but has also become reliant on raw material exports to China.

This is a new era, the report proclaims. “Competition between nation-states, especially between China and the United States, is deeply rooted and structural in nature,” it states. “It is a feature of the era, not a passing moment.”

In this context, the review warns that “risks to prosperity, security and sovereignty are increasingly complex to manage and pose difficult choices and trade-offs for Australia.”

Although written before the accession of the fascistic Trump administration, the report sounds an alarm about the impact of the international political and geo-strategic instability:

The election of more nationalist or populist governments in Europe and the United States, for example, could introduce considerable uncertainty in global affairs and alter some of Australia’s current foreign and economic policy planning assumptions.

Under these conditions, the report underscores the Australian ruling class’s commitment to the US. It emphasises Australia’s increasingly pivotal position for the US-led Five Eyes global intelligence system, which also includes the UK, Canada and New Zealand.

“Australia and its geography are becoming more important to efforts to improve the collective resilience of the Five Eyes enterprise in the event of a crisis or conflict,” it states.

The review reinforces the reliance on “the alliance with the United States and the Five Eyes partnership,” describing them as “national assets for Australia, providing access to information, expertise and technology that would not otherwise be obtainable.”

The report continues the shift away from the alleged threat of

terrorism as the main pretext for the vast expansion of police-state surveillance powers since the US declaration of the “war on terror” in 2001.

While “terrorism remains a persistent threat,” the review lists “Australia’s principal security concerns” as “systemic state competition, cyber threats, espionage and foreign interference.”

There is also an intensified internal focus on “fraying social cohesion.” This is code language for the rising social and political discontent among workers and young people fuelled by the soaring cost-of-living and social inequality, the bipartisan support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and the pro-war drumbeating in ruling circles. According to the report:

The sources of internal fragmentation are varied but often amplify each other. They include the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, political polarisation, inequality, declining faith in democracy, large-scale misinformation and disinformation powered by the internet, and deliberate attempts by some countries (notably Russia and China) to stoke internal divides in democracies.

Significantly, the review urges the government to help overcome public distrust in the “intelligence community.” It notes that the prominence of the agencies in “supporting government” has “not been without controversy.” It insists: “Building public understanding of, and support for, a strong Australian intelligence enterprise is essential.”

Among its 67 recommendations, the report demands a further increase in the powers of the intelligence agencies, starting with an “urgent” extension of their legal capacity to access the computers and telecommunications of “particular groups,” rather than just named individuals.

It also calls for related amendments to the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Act to officially permit ASIO, the domestic political surveillance agency, to share its “raw foreign intelligence information” with the central ONI, which could then share it with US and other agencies.

Without providing any detail, another recommendation stresses “the need for deeper integration of intelligence with other arms of government.”

In releasing the report, Albanese said the intelligence agencies were crucial to the country’s security “and we have full confidence in their capacity.” He vowed to “continue to invest in capability to ensure Australia’s intelligence community can deal with emerging threats and challenges.”

As an initial pre-election downpayment, the Labor government promised to plough another \$45 million into the

ONI, the peak agency, over four years. That is on top of the funding for the entire NIC network more than doubling since 2017, from just under \$2 billion to \$4.5 billion in 2023.

Much more is in the pipeline, including \$1.25 billion over ten years for ASIO to “strengthen its capacity” and \$469 million over four years to “modernise” the overseas spy agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS). There is also \$9.9 billion over ten years to boost the capacities of the electronic surveillance agency, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), especially its “defensive and offensive cyber capabilities.”

The review also covers the activities of the other six NIC agencies. They are the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the satellite mapping Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation (AGO), the police-linked Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC), the financial tracking Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC), the military’s Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) and the Department of Home Affairs.

The Labor government instructed the review to examine the performance of these agencies since the last similar report in 2017, when the then Turnbull Liberal-National government responded to the formation of the first Trump administration by restructuring the intelligence apparatus. It established the ONI, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence, inside the prime minister’s office to establish centralised control over all 10 agencies.

At that time, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, surrounded by masked Special Forces commandos, also announced expedited measures to call out the military to suppress any outbreaks of “domestic violence” and outlined plans for a Home Affairs super-ministry to take direct command of seven surveillance and police agencies.

Today, the political fears and strategic calculations in ruling circles go far deeper. They are driven by the global turmoil and uncertainties produced by the second Trump administration and the rise of seething discontent in every country, including Australia.

The spy and surveillance agencies, a key instrument of the capitalist state apparatus, are being prepared to deal with even more intense social and political dissatisfaction under conditions of widening social inequality, genocide and the accelerating turn to war.



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