New Zealand intelligence report accuses China of “foreign interference”

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (SIS) released its annual “Security Threat Environment” report on August 21. The document purports to give an “assessment of violent extremism, foreign interference and espionage in New Zealand.”

The 30-page report has two basic purposes. Firstly, it serves as propaganda to justify the National Party-led government’s agenda—fully supported by the opposition Labour Party—to double New Zealand’s military budget and integrate the country into the far-advanced US plans for war against China.

Secondly, it seeks to justify the expansion of domestic surveillance, censorship, and other attacks on the rights of New Zealand citizens and migrants, in the name of countering “violent extremism” and “foreign interference.”

Director-General of Security Andrew Hampton declared in a statement: “Our threat environment is deteriorating and that has a direct impact on our safety and security. Increasing levels of polarisation and grievance are driving support for violent extremist ideologies and foreign states are more willing to target New Zealand organisations and communities in order to achieve their aims.”

The SIS report accuses China, Russia and Iran of being “willing to engage in covert or deceptive activity in order to influence discussions and decisions.” It singles out China as “a particularly assertive and powerful actor… [seeking to] extend and embed its influence across the [Indo-Pacific] region. It has demonstrated both a willingness and capability to undertake intelligence activity that targets New Zealand’s national interests.”

China is described as the “most active” state undertaking “foreign interference,” which the SIS defines as seeking “to influence, disrupt, or subvert New Zealand’s national interests by deceptive, corruptive, or coercive means.”

This assertion has been repeated uncritically by the media, even though the SIS provides no actual evidence of Chinese espionage or “interference.” No one linked to Beijing has been arrested or charged with such activity.

A statement by the Chinese Embassy in Wellington denounced the accusations as “entirely unsubstantiated and groundless, saturated with ideological bias and a Cold War mentality.” It said the SIS’s aim was “to sow discord, obstruct bilateral engagement” and undermine friendly relations between China and New Zealand, “all in service of [a] certain geopolitical agenda.”

Successive New Zealand governments have strengthened economic ties with China, NZ’s most significant trading partner. At the same time, NZ remains a minor imperialist power allied to the US, and the NZ military has repeatedly joined exercises that are rehearsing for an attack on China.

As part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network led by the US, New Zealand agencies have been implicated in spying on China. The Trump administration recently opened a new FBI office in Wellington with the explicit aim of “countering” China.

The SIS report refers several times to “people co-opted to act on behalf of the foreign state.” These “co-optees are often New Zealanders themselves” and are alleged to be involved in surveillance of diaspora communities, influencing NZ government officials, and leading unnamed “community organisations” or “front organisations.”

The prominent pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady, who welcomed the SIS report, has repeatedly labelled Chinese language learning groups, student

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organisations and media outlets in NZ as “fronts” for the Chinese Communist Party, and called for them to be subject to surveillance.

The most well-known recent example of someone who was investigated by the SIS as an alleged “foreign agent” is the journalist Mick Hall, who was subjected to a media-driven hate campaign in 2023 and forced out of his job at Radio NZ. His “crime” was making entirely factual edits to articles about the US-NATO proxy war with Russia over Ukraine—which undermined the pervasive anti-Russia war propaganda—for which he was smeared as a “Russian agent.”

Draft legislation currently before parliament would create a new specific offence of “foreign interference,” punishable by up to 14 years in prison. The bill, which is supported by the opposition Labour Party, would provide the means to prosecute anti-war activists and socialists by labelling them as “foreign agents” acting against “national interests.”

The section of the SIS report under the heading “New Zealand’s violent extremism environment” appears to have been written largely to support the government’s plan to ban teenagers under 16 years old from using social media. Such a ban can only be enforced by collecting information about all social media users.

The SIS declares: “Teenagers are increasingly coming to the attention of security services around the world. This trend will almost certainly continue, particularly given how exposed young people are to the online world, and the vast amounts of harmful content readily available.”

It warns: “Unfettered access to the internet, along with a lack of anyone disrupting or asking questions about [teenagers’] activity, can make the pathways to violence incredibly short.” The clear implication is that young people’s internet access should be restricted and policed to prevent “radicalisation.”

While the SIS mentions Islamic State and “white identity” ideologies as examples of “violent extremism,” the primary target of online censorship internationally and in New Zealand is not the far-right, but anti-war and socialist views. The *World Socialist Web Site* is heavily censored by social media algorithms and in Google search results.

The SIS has previously sought to stoke suspicion towards the mass protests against the Gaza genocide, which are continuing across New Zealand. In December 2024 the agency claimed that the “widening Israel/Gaza conflict” was linked to “anti-Semitic and Islamophobic narratives in New Zealand,” without giving any evidence or examples of this.

During the First and Second World Wars, New Zealand governments established a police state, which banned socialist and anti-war publications and imprisoned hundreds of people on “sedition” charges for opposing the war.

In response to the historic crisis of capitalism, the imperialist powers led by the US are now plunging towards a third world war aimed at dominating the world’s markets and resources. New Zealand is directly involved on multiple fronts: NZ troops in Britain are training Ukrainian conscripts to fight Russia, and in the Middle East, assisting in the US-led bombing of Yemen; and NZ is openly supporting US-led warmongering against China.

The ruling elite is strengthening the powers of the state in preparation to suppress mass opposition to war, genocide and to the deepening attacks on living standards and public services that are being carried out to fund the military. The National Party-led government is proceeding with the full support of Labour and the union bureaucracy, which is blocking any organised opposition by workers.

The working class must respond with its own, socialist and internationalist strategy to abolish the capitalist system, which is the only way to put an end to war, social inequality and the drive to dictatorship.

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