

New Zealand intelligence report accuses China of spying “at scale”

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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In its Security Threat Environment report, released on August 13, New Zealand’s domestic spy agency, the Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) baldly claimed that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the sole country engaged in espionage in New Zealand “at scale.” The report also declared that China is the “most active” nation involved in “foreign interference.”

Annual NZSIS reports have become increasingly bellicose in their anti-China denunciations. Director-General Andrew Hampton declared in the foreword to the 2026 report that “malign behaviours and activities” over the past year “are proving even more threatening” than in the past.

The report states that the NZSIS is monitoring “state actors with a voracious appetite for any information they can leverage to gain an advantage over New Zealand or our partners.”

These unsubstantiated claims are bound up with the ruling elite’s escalating involvement with US-led war preparations, which have reached an advanced stage. Despite the fact that China is New Zealand’s most important trading partner, successive governments have identified China and Russia as strategic “threats,” backing the militarisation of the Indo-Pacific and joining provocative anti-China exercises.

The NZSIS’s evidence about China’s purported nefarious activities is extremely thin and speculative. In a “case study” highlighted in the media, the report accuses Purple Mountain Observatory, described as “an organisation based in China with close links to its government,” of attempting to install ground-based space infrastructure (GBSI) in New Zealand. GBSI is used to track and monitor objects in orbit.

Purple Mountain, also known as Zijinshan Astronomical Observatory, is China’s major astronomical observatory, originally built in 1934 and operated by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It carries out extensive astronomy research, including deep-space exploration, and contributes to the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee and global asteroid impact avoidance efforts.

Speaking to Radio NZ’s podcast “The Detail,” Anna Fifield, a former *Washington Post* Beijing bureau chief,

declared in breathless tones that NZSIS had provided “a really concrete example of how a Chinese state-affiliated research institute had used a cover story to try to trick a New Zealand company into letting them install [GBSI], which is basically radar or antenna like that from which they can monitor activity in space.”

The NZSIS states that Purple Mountain worked with a NZ company to try and install equipment that could hypothetically be used to “collect intelligence of military value” and pass it on to the Chinese government. It provides no “concrete” detail whatsoever about this episode and does not name the local company being “tricked,” detail the “cover story” or the nature of the proposed GBSI installation.

The NZSIS does not claim, let alone substantiate with evidence, that the Chinese scientific institution was attempting to conduct espionage activity. Nevertheless, the report’s vague insinuations have been presented in the NZ and international media as damning proof against China.

The agency also claims to have “observed increased targeting of professional networking sites and online job platforms for espionage purposes by China’s military intelligence services.” NZ officials have allegedly been “pressured” or duped into giving information to Chinese agents posing as consultants or representatives of think tanks, offering them jobs.

In a section titled “Insider Threat,” the NZSIS report says that public and private sector employees in New Zealand are “causing harm to their organisations and our national security through actions that are either deliberate, influenced by outsiders or unwitting.” In June, Hampton told the media that several people came “close to unwittingly giving sensitive information to China’s military.” China is accused of using sites like LinkedIn to target those people with access to government and military information.

Again, no proof is offered to support any of these claims: the public is expected to unquestioningly swallow everything the NZSIS says. These accusations are designed to create a climate of suspicion and fear across government

departments and agencies.

Gathering information and making contacts through social media platforms like LinkedIn is hardly the stuff of serious espionage. The website is commonly used by employers, researchers, journalists and others to find details about people. It is doubtless used extensively by the NZSIS itself.

The report accuses China of carrying out “foreign interference” to “subvert, disrupt or influence governance, democratic institutions and processes such as elections or policymaking.”

The NZSIS claims that states have sought “to leverage [diaspora] communities’ political power to gain influence.” It warns that during the 2026 election campaign, “candidates will think they are engaging with representatives or spokespeople for diaspora communities, when in fact it could be a foreign state actor.”

The purpose of these assertions is to portray immigrants as suspicious and potentially acting on behalf of the Chinese government.

Writing on the *Newsroom* website, anti-China academic Anne-Marie Brady hypocritically said the NZSIS was seeking to protect “our Chinese New Zealanders’ freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of association and right to a free media and political rights.”

Brady has long agitated for increased surveillance of Chinese people in NZ and called for voting to be restricted to citizens only, removing the right to vote from hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants who hold permanent residency. This demand is now being pushed by the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party.

Everything in the NZSIS report is hypocritical in the extreme. As part of the Five Eyes—the intelligence-sharing network that includes the US, UK, Australia and Canada—New Zealand’s spy agencies routinely share information with the US National Security Agency, including private communications intercepted by the Waihopai spy base in the South Island.

In 2014–2015 whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that the external intelligence agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), engaged in wholesale spying on the country’s Pacific neighbours, Asian countries including China and people within New Zealand.

China’s Wellington embassy said the allegations in the NZSIS report “either smear normal exchanges and cooperation as so-called espionage or interference, or are entirely groundless and fabricated out of thin air.” It noted that the escalating vilification of China “may well itself be a product of foreign interference,” inferring direct involvement by Washington.

NZ’s most overt case of foreign political interference was openly carried out by the US following the inconclusive

election result in September 2017. US ambassador Scott Brown gave three extraordinary media interviews defending President Trump’s threats to wage war on North Korea and seeking to pressure the incoming government to more openly align with Washington. After Brown’s intervention, Labour formed a government with NZ First and installed its pro-US leader Winston Peters as foreign minister.

In July 2025, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Kash Patel opened a permanent office attached to the US embassy in Wellington, which he said was aimed at “countering” China in the Indo-Pacific region.

As the November election approaches, the NZSIS is contributing to an increasingly hysterical anti-China atmosphere to condition the population for deeper integration into US war plans. NZ First, which is part of the ruling National Party-led coalition, is leading the charge. Its candidate Michael Laws declared on the right-wing Platform podcast that the NZSIS report showed that “we can’t trust [China].”

Laws also implied that National Party MP Nancy Liu had been groomed as a spy for the Chinese Communist Party. This followed a tirade in parliament by Peters, who told Chinese-born Green Party MP Lawrence Xu-Nan to “go back to your own country.”

The working class must respond by rejecting the xenophobia and militarism being promoted by all the capitalist parties, and join the campaign to build a unified international and socialist anti-war movement.



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