

Australia declares China a threat to military-related university research and infrastructure

By Mike Head
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Two interventions by Australian surveillance or strategic agencies this week sought to whip up hostility toward China in readiness for Canberra's involvement in a US-led war against Beijing. Both depicted Australia as being on the frontline of a battle against Chinese "interference" and plans for war.

A report by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) alleged that Chinese military-linked researchers are working "undercover" in US and allied universities. It was published on Tuesday, a day after a speech by the chief of Australia's electronic spy agency warning of China's "potential threat" to infrastructure that would be "critical" in wartime.

The twin interventions are another sign of advanced preparations being made for war. They were made amid increasingly overt trade war and military moves by the Trump administration to confront China and prevent it from ever becoming a challenge to the global hegemony established by the US capitalist class after World War II.

After years of minimising any possibility of Australia's population being dragged into a nuclear war between the US and China, the "national security" establishment and the corporate media are ever-more openly accusing China of espionage and aggression. A two-year drumbeat about rising Chinese "interference" in Australia is being taken to a new level by the authorities and their partners in the US-led Five Eyes global spy network.

ASPI's report triggered media headlines around the world, including in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Financial Times* and Canada's *Globe and Mail*, as well as across Australia. "A new report has found Chinese military scientists regularly work undercover in Australian universities on sensitive research projects," Rupert Murdoch's New Corp headlines declared.

Based on unsubstantiated assertions and unclear estimates, the *Picking flowers, making honey* report declares that since 2007, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) "has sponsored more than 2,500 military scientists and engineers to study abroad and has developed relationships with researchers and institutions across the globe." Supposedly, these researchers are sent overseas to "pick" the fruits of developments of military-related technology and bring them home to make "honey" for the PLA.

Beyond the report's alarmist opening claim, the number of scholars claimed to be hiding their military links over the past decade is much smaller. "Dozens of PLA scientists have obscured their military affiliations to travel to Five Eyes countries and the European Union, including at least 17 to Australia, where they work in areas such as hypersonic missiles and navigation technology."

Moreover, much of the research seems to be openly published in reputable academic journals, as per the norms of scientific activity. The author's report, Alex Joske, says he calculated that the number of peer-reviewed articles jointly authored with alleged "PLA scientists" rose from 112 in 2006 to 734 in 2017. Almost half were published in the US or UK, with 84 in Australia.

Unscientifically extrapolating from these statistics, Joske produces his headline figure of 2,500 military-related scientists working overseas between 2006 and 2017. Joske admits to a "major shortcoming" with the methodology, because articles could possibly be counted twice.

Relying on US intelligence claims, the report also alleges: "In addition to their overt activities, PLA researchers, especially those who haven't been forthcoming about their military affiliations, may engage

in espionage or steal intellectual property while overseas. The PLA engages in such high levels of espionage that in 2014 the US Government took the unusual step of publicly indicting five Chinese military hackers.”

ASPI’s report welcomes the Australian government’s current review of the Defence Trade Controls Act, which has seen the Department of Defence call for sweeping new restrictions on all scientific research in Australia, whether directly related to military purposes or not, backed by powers to raid universities and businesses suspected of breaching the rules.

However, ASPI goes further, calling for tighter visa checks and stronger US-style rules prohibiting “national security” exports and research activities, bans on investment in Australia by Chinese defence companies and a committee, modelled on a US body, to bring university leaders together with the security agencies.

It cites the Trump administration’s US National Security Strategy document of December 2017 that named China a “strategic competitor” and urges a greater anti-China propaganda campaign: “Politicians and senior public servants should better articulate what’s in the national interest and publicly explain why advancing China’s military capabilities isn’t in the national interest.”

The report threateningly warns universities that they “risk reputational damage” and “eroding trust” with official and corporate research funders “by collaborating with a non-allied military.”

Joske, until recently an Australian National University student, is currently employed by ASPI. As a student, he supplied similar dubious material for *Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia* written by Clive Hamilton, a former Greens candidate, now university professor. The book insinuated that the majority of Australia’s 1.2 million people of Chinese descent are not “loyal” to Australia; cast suspicion over many of the country’s 130,000 Chinese students, as well as many individually named academics, scientists and researchers “of Chinese descent,” and alleged that numbers of prominent business and political leaders are “fifth columnists.”

Silent Invasion called for Australia to join a US-led war against China, supposedly as the only way to stop the country from becoming a “tribute state of the resurgent Middle Kingdom.”

In a rare public speech, delivered to an ASPI “National Security Dinner” in Canberra on Monday, Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) director-general Mike Burgess declared that his electronic spy agency—formerly a

quasi-secret arm of the military—had “come out of the shadows” to make the population aware of its activities, because of new threats” to “Australia’s most important interests.”

Burgess did not name China but said “strategic and economic power is shifting east.” He declared that this posed unprecedented dangers to Australia’s “industrial base” and “critical infrastructure.”

Burgess claimed credit for the Liberal-National government’s decision, announced on the eve of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s ouster on August 24, to ban the Chinese telcos, Huawei and ZTE, from Australia’s proposed 5G networks. Such “high-risk” vendors” had the potential to cripple the networks and all essential infrastructure, he insisted.

“5G technology will underpin the communications that Australians rely on every day, from our health systems and the potential applications of remote surgery, to self-driving cars and through to the operation of our power and water supply,” Burgess said. “The stakes could not be higher... Getting security right for our critical infrastructure is paramount.”

While drumming up a wartime atmosphere, Burgess denied that ASD had any “interest in communications involving everyday Australians.” By law, ASD is meant to operate only against overseas targets. He insisted that ASD was only focussed on terrorists, “cyber threats” and “foreign espionage or interference.”

This is known to be untrue. In the Five Eyes network, the ASD is integrated into the operations of its US equivalent, the National Security Agency (NSA). As the revelations of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden and leaked documents published by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have demonstrated, the NSA and its partners conduct mass surveillance worldwide.

This includes sharing information on each other’s citizens who are regarded as threats to the ruling establishment—in particular, opponents of the drive to war, worsening inequality and erosion of basic democratic rights under the capitalist system.

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