Expanding on his oft-stated warning that espionage and foreign interference is increasing, the outgoing Director-General of ASIO cautioned, in a speech on 4 September that it was ‘by far and away the most serious issue going forward’, with the potential to be an ‘existential threat to the state’. Federal government MPs Andrew Hastie and Dan Tehan were among those who expressed their concern at a report last month that authorities in China warned the family of a student who participated in anti-China protests in Australia about the potential consequences of the student’s actions. But while foreign interference may be on the rise, reports of intimidatory tactics are neither new nor limited to China.

‘Acts of foreign interference’ is one of the threats to security specified in the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979 from which ASIO is tasked with protecting Australia; but until the introduction last year of the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018, Australia never had any specific foreign interference offences. As noted in the Parliamentary Library’s Budget Review 2019–20, this year’s Budget included $34.8 million over four years to counter foreign interference, part of which will establish a Foreign Interference Threat Assessment Centre to be operated by the Australian Federal Police and ASIO. The Government’s new ‘framework’ for the development of guidelines to support the work of the recently established University Foreign Interference Taskforce identifies the ‘suppression of dissident voices’ as a source of potential harm:

International experience has shown that some foreign actors may seek to interfere with a vibrant university experience by:

- shutting down discordant voices and providing incentives to develop ones that are more favourable;
- exerting pressure on families in home countries, aimed at censoring discussion and debate; or
appealing to students' loyalty or nationalism to elicit information.

In ASIO's 2017–18 annual report, the then Director-General, Duncan Lewis, noted that 'espionage and foreign interference represent a serious threat to Australia’s sovereignty and security and the integrity of our national institutions’ and that foreign actors are ‘attempting to clandestinely influence the opinions of members of the Australian public and media, Australian Government officials, and members of Australia-based diaspora communities’. The report also noted that ‘ethnic and religious communities in Australia have also been the subject of interference operations designed to diminish their criticism of foreign governments’. In evidence to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security in March 2018, Mr Lewis referred to ASIO’s assessment that espionage and foreign interference activities are currently being conducted against Australia on an ‘unprecedented scale’.

While its scale and scope may be increasing, foreign interference is not an entirely recent phenomenon nor limited to a single country, with the ABC claiming to have been told by intelligence sources that Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, North Korea and Malaysia are also ‘known to monitor their diaspora living in Australia, while also seeking to silence those who might speak out against their former governments’. Reports indicate that migrants, refugees and other ex-pats might themselves be threatened if they criticise their countries of origin or may be coerced into informing on others. In February 2018 it was reported that the Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen, ahead of a visit to Sydney to attend the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, ‘had threatened to physically “beat up” Cambodian-Australians if they protested against his visit’. A protest organiser was reported as stating:

“The biggest problem is Cambodians who live overseas, who can speak up. He’s [Hun Sen] trying to control Cambodians overseas.

“They have got spies in the community. They have infiltrated the community. Some people are too scared to come because they don’t want their face identified.”

Some African countries are also said to have attempted to silence political dissidents living in Australia. In June 2016 it was reported that following a protest in Melbourne staged by the local Ethiopian community against the official visit to Australia by senior Ethiopian officials, some of the protesters’ relatives in Ethiopia were detained. Among the visiting officials was Abdi Mohammed Omar (known as ‘Abdi Illey’), the then president of the Somali Regional State and former head of security, who had been accused of human rights violations (Illey was arrested in Ethiopia in 2018, and reportedly charged earlier this year with inciting violence). One of the protesters, reportedly a former Ethiopian judge granted refugee status and now living in Australia, alleged he was threatened with ‘punishment’ by a member of Illey’s entourage:

And he said, give me 15 minutes then I will punish you. I said, hey are you dreaming? This is Australia. I'm an Australian. This is a free country, a democratic country. This is not Ethiopia. And he said in another way, in another way, I will punish you. And give me 15 minutes and I will show you in 15 minutes you will come under my feet, begging me.

The protester claims that a short while later he received a phone call from Ethiopia telling him that his mother, sister and three of his brothers had been arrested and detained. Human Rights Watch later alleged that at least 32 family members of ten protesters had been detained in Ethiopia and reported that ‘numerous Ethiopian Somali Australians said that pro-government supporters living in Australia regularly harass community members perceived as government opponents’. While officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade met with the delegation, including Abdi Illey, during the high-level visit, the Department later undertook to raise the incident with the Ethiopian Government.

Recent reports by the ABC suggest that Rwandans living in Australia are monitored and harassed by operatives of the Rwandan Government, including being threatened with violence by anonymous text messages or in person through relatives. Many are said to live in fear of putting their families in Rwanda in danger if they speak out. It was even claimed by one man that Rwandan Government agents work in Australian Government agencies and refugee services, allowing them to access personal information. Others, he says, ‘are planted in Australia as
students because visas are easier to obtain’. The article reports that ‘expat and refugee Rwandans say silencing critics and suppressing support for opposition parties in exile are among the top priorities of the Rwandan Government’.

Reports suggest that these tactics have at least some impact. In addition to claims that some international students feel constrained in what they can safely say in class, reports in August indicated that international students at one university in Australia had abandoned planned protests out of fear for their own safety and that of their families in China, after students attending protests and a lecture on Chinese influence noticed they were being filmed. It remains to be seen whether the combined efforts of Australia’s law enforcement, diplomatic and intelligence services are effective in dealing with the threat.

Tags: National security; ASIO