

Spies target Australian exporters' trade secrets

Anthony Galloway –*Sydney Morning Herald online* - 22 March 2021

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Foreign spies are targeting Australia's mining and agricultural industries in a bid to get sensitive information on how the nation is diversifying trade away from China.

In an interview with the *Herald*, ASIO director general Mike Burgess said several countries are trying to steal trade secrets from top Australian companies.

Mr Burgess also revealed the counterespionage agency has already used a new power to place tracking devices on cars without a warrant, while it is also about to use its powers to forcibly question foreign spies for the first time. Mr Burgess warned foreign intelligence agencies were targeting a broad range of export and research industries. Australia is looking to end its over-reliance on Chinese trade after Beijing slapped more than \$20 billion in tariffs on Australian exports in the past year.

“They're coming in and asking for information inside those industries,” Mr Burgess said. “Sometimes... they're after intellectual property but it can be on the business dealings: what they're doing, how the organisation is going, how it might be feeling about Australian government policies, how attentive the Australian government is to it.” In his annual threat assessment, delivered on Wednesday night, Mr Burgess warned foreign spy agencies were “wanting intelligence about Australia's key export, technology and research industries”.

He would not identify the specific industries when asked but intelligence sources believe the resources and agricultural sector are prime targets.

As Australia faces a continuing trade stoush with China, several countries are trying to get an edge as companies look to diversify their export markets.

China last year imposed tariffs on Australian exports — including beef, barley, wine and coal — after a diplomatic dispute over an independent inquiry into COVID-19, human rights concerns and key national security decisions.

Mr Burgess said ASIO was noticing an increase in foreign intelligence services paying attention to Australian export industries through “human sources and cyber means”.

“It really is broad – anything that exports, anything that is doing well, and actually not doing so well,” Mr Burgess said. “That's part of our challenge. When we learn what they're targeting, why are they targeting that? What's their objective?”

New laws passed in December give ASIO the power to place tracking devices on cars with only internal approval, rather than a warrant, and expands the agency's compulsory questioning powers to apply to foreign spies.

Mr Burgess said ASIO has already used the tracking device power, while it will soon use the laws to compulsorily question at least one suspected foreign spy or proxy. The intelligence boss this week announced ASIO last year uncovered a “nest of spies” from a foreign intelligence service that had cultivated and recruited an Australian government security clearance holder with access to sensitive details of defence technology.

He said ASIO would stop using “Islamic extremism” and “right-wing extremism” as umbrella terms, saying the agency needs to be conscious the labels it uses are important. Instead ASIO will refer to broad terms of “religiously motivated violent extremism” and “ideologically motivated extremism”.

Asked if ASIO made the decision in response to conservative politicians who voiced displeasure at the term “rightwing” extremism, Mr Burgess said: “That’s not the reason we changed it.”

“In recent times, there’s this new ideology that’s come now, they are a real concern, and ... it’s about 40 per cent of our priority CT [counterterrorism] caseload,” Mr Burgess said.

“That means it’s topical, it’s there to be discussed. We can see how people can get confused by this and we really wanted to have language that actually focuses on the motivations and security-relevant information.”

Mr Burgess confirmed none of its priority counterterrorism included cases he would describe as left-wing extremism but stressed he didn’t want to refer to “left” or “right”.