

POLITICS FEDERAL NATIONAL SECURITY

ASIO foils plot to infiltrate Australian government

By [Anthony Galloway](#)

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The domestic spy agency ASIO has foiled a plot by foreign intelligence operatives to recruit senior government staffers to provide classified information about Australia's counterespionage activities.

A foreign national based in Australia was working with a team of spies overseas to penetrate senior levels of the government.



ASIO boss Mike Burgess says the plot to infiltrate the Australian government was thwarted by his organisation. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

The primary goal was to covertly acquire classified information about Australian intelligence agencies' operations and capabilities - especially those directed at their country.

The concerning plot is revealed in the annual report of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation which was tabled in parliament on Thursday.

If the plot was successful, ASIO believes it could have granted the foreign government significant strategic advantage over Australia.

The domestic intelligence agency says it conducted "overt activity" against the Australia-based foreign national and the network of foreign spies, which "thwarted the foreign intelligence operation and prevented the passage of classified information" to the foreign government.

ASIO director-general Mike Burgess said his organisation discovered and disrupted the plot this year.

"An Australia-based foreign national was working with a team of foreign intelligence officers, who were trying to recruit multiple Australian security clearance holders," Mr Burgess said.

"The agents wanted sensitive information about the intelligence community's operations, particularly those directed against their home country."

While ASIO did not name countries which have been most involved in espionage and foreign interference against Australia, [China is believed to be the country Australian security agencies are most concerned about.](#)

Mr Burgess said there were now more foreign spies and their proxies in Australia "than there were at the height of the Cold War.

"Foreign governments are seeking information about Australia's capabilities, research and technology, and domestic and foreign policy," he said.

Mr Burgess also warned right-wing extremists were "more organised, sophisticated, ideological and active than previous years".

"While we have been actively monitoring the threat for some time, this year extreme right-wing individuals comprised around one-third of our counter-terrorism subjects," he said.

"Many of these groups and individuals have seized on COVID-19, believing it reinforces the narratives and conspiracies at the core of their ideologies.

"They see the pandemic as proof of the failure of globalisation, multiculturalism and democracy, and confirmation that societal collapse and a 'race war' are inevitable."

ASIO warned the threat level for terrorism remained at "PROBABLE", with Mr Burgess saying he saw no prospect that it will be lowered in the foreseeable future.

He said Sunni Islamic extremism remained ASIO's greatest concern.

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