



Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs

Countering Foreign Interference in Australia

Working together towards
a more secure Australia



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Foreign interference is a threat to our way of life.

Espionage and foreign interference threatens Australia's sovereignty, democracy, values and national interests – our way of life.

Australia is the target of sophisticated and persistent foreign interference activities from a range of countries.

As the Director-General of Security has previously stated, 'Threats to our way of life represent Australia's principal security concern. Based on what the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation is identifying, investigating, assessing and disrupting, more Australians are being targeted for espionage and foreign interference than ever before.'

Failure to address foreign interference will have negative long-term consequences for Australia.

Left unchecked it will continue to undermine our democratic values, civil rights, government institutions, economic prosperity, media and community cohesion.

This document outlines:

- Who is most at risk.
- What the government is doing to address foreign interference.
- What individuals and organisations can do to protect themselves.

Foreign interference is a crime in Australia and is punishable by up to 20 years imprisonment under the Commonwealth *Criminal Code Act 1995*.

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How to report suspected foreign interference

In an emergency call 000

For individuals and general reports

The National Security Hotline

- Call: 1800 1234 00 (From outside Australia: (+61) 1300 1234 01)
- Email: hotline@nationalsecurity.gov.au

Reports made to the National Security Hotline can be made anonymously, and are passed to the appropriate law enforcement and security agencies for consideration.

For Government and Australian businesses and research industries

The Notifiable Incidents Threats or Reportable Observations (NITRO) portal

- Secure website portal: [Home | NITRO \(asio.gov.au\)](#)

NITRO is a secure internet portal created for Australian businesses and research institutions to report suspicious activities and any incidents of intimidation, harassment, coercion, or threats.

What is foreign interference?

Foreign interference is activities carried out by, on behalf of, are directed or subsidised by, or are undertaken in active collaboration with, a foreign power and either involves:

- a threat to a person, or
- is clandestine or deceptive and detrimental to Australia's interests.

Targets of foreign government interference

- People – who may be susceptible to corruption or coercion, or who may be tricked into acting on behalf of a foreign government.
- Infrastructure and institutions – which can be controlled, accessed or disrupted.
- Information – which can be stolen, manipulated or made up.

What is espionage?

- Espionage is the theft of information by someone acting on behalf of a foreign power, or intending to provide information to a foreign power which is seeking advantage over Australia.

How is foreign influence different from foreign interference?

It is important to distinguish between foreign interference and foreign influence.

- All governments, including the Australian Government, seek to influence issues of importance to them.
- Foreign influence is activity that is open, transparent and respectful of our people, society and democratic systems.
- Foreign influence can include diplomatic activities, political lobbying, communication activities, disbursements, and cultural diplomacy.

When conducted in an open and transparent manner, these activities are not foreign interference.

Who is most at risk of foreign interference?

Foreign governments are targeting different parts of Australian society in different ways.

Communities

While the threat of foreign interference applies to the Australian community, members of our diaspora communities are often at greater risk from foreign governments seeking to repress them.

Foreign interference in the community can take many forms, including:

- Intimidation, physical or electronic surveillance, kidnapping or assault of individuals viewed as dissidents by a foreign government.
- Interfering with democratic participation and undermining social connections.
- Online information operations that attempt to discredit or humiliate an individual or group.
- Forcing individuals to advance the economic or political interests of a foreign government by threatening their family or associates overseas.
- Forcing members of our community to leave Australia and return to their country of origin, outside of agreed extradition processes.

Foreign interference can have the following impacts on communities.

- Members of the community are unable to participate freely in public debate.
- Members self-censor and feel alienated from the broader community.

Example: Intimidation of protesters

Jesse attends a lawful protest in an Australian city on a political issue in another country. Jesse notices that there is a person taking photos and videos of the protestors. After attending the protest, Jesse starts being harassed online. Jesse's family in another country are questioned and threatened with serious harm by local authorities about Jesse's activities in Australia. Jesse begins to censor his behaviour and speech out of fear of further harassment, limiting his freedom of expression and participation in the Australian community.

Democratic institutions

Foreign interference can challenge Australians' commitment to democratic values and reduce public confidence in the integrity of our democracy. Globally, foreign governments have attempted to undermine democracies through electoral, political and bureaucratic interference, using methods such as:

- Attempting to sway an electoral outcome towards a candidate or political party whose policies are more favourable to the foreign government.
- Attempting to covertly influence, coerce or corrupt political candidates, political staff or government officials to serve foreign interests over Australia's interests.
- Spreading disinformation to reduce voter confidence in the integrity of electoral processes and democratic government.

Example: Interference in Australian politics

A foreign power covertly directs an Australian community member to donate to an Australian politician's political campaign. The Australian politician is subsequently positively disposed towards the community member, and agrees to the individual's request that the Australian politician take a particular position on an issue of benefit to the foreign power. The community member does not tell the Australian politician that a foreign power directed them to engage in this behaviour.

In this example, both the foreign power and the community member have engaged in an act of foreign interference, but not the politician, who is unwitting to the covert involvement of the foreign power.

Higher education and research

Foreign interference can undermine academic freedoms in Australian universities and other education providers. Foreign governments may attempt to recruit academics with the intent of changing the direction of their research or attempting to steal intellectual property to gain a military or commercial advantage. Foreign governments can attempt to covertly shape university curriculum to align with their interests, and monitor and intimidate international students.

This can look like:

- Using economic pressure to coerce universities into signing unfavourable arrangements that deliver intellectual property rights and economic benefits almost exclusively to foreign countries.
- Attempts to influence academic freedom of inquiry, language of discourse, research topics, or course content, to align with foreign interests.
- Attempting to silence freedom of speech and expression on campus when views do not align with those of a foreign government.

Example: Universities and research

An academic conducting research on defence-related technology attends a conference in a foreign country, with the organisers covering all expenses. The organisers used the conference to target them for recruitment. After the conclusion of the conference, the academic returns to Australia, and starts providing information about Australia's national security and defence priorities to conference attendees living in the foreign country. This results in a degradation of Australia's national security.

Industry

Foreign interference can constrain Australian business capability and profitability, negatively impacting our economic prosperity, defence capability and the trust placed in us by friends and allies. Technologies, critical minerals and critical infrastructure are all areas of interest to foreign governments.

Methods used to undermine industry include:

- Joint ventures and collaborations, where the affiliations or intentions of the international partner are deliberately hidden.
- Using business arrangements to acquire Australia's research and technology for the commercial and military advantage of other countries.
- Manipulation of markets and supply chains to damage Australian industry capability and competitiveness within important economic sectors.

Example: Joint partnerships in industries

An Australian company entered into a joint venture with a foreign state owned enterprise (SOE). The foreign SOE has a close relationship with the foreign state's intelligence services. The foreign SOE injects significant capital into the project, and has organised a secondment program into the Australian company. The Australian company was aware of potential national security risks, but signed the deal anyway due to commercial reasons. The joint venture subsequently exposed the company to foreign interference and espionage.

Media and communications

Strong democracies are characterised by the availability of trustworthy information, freedom of expression and independent media. Foreign interference in the media can undermine Australians' ability to make well-informed political, social and economic decisions, and can worsen community tensions, eroding our social cohesion.

This can look like:

- Promotion of narratives and spread of disinformation, which serve the interests of a foreign government, and undermine democratic values.
- Recruitment of journalists and other media professionals in an attempt to control the information they disseminate to the public.
- Attempting to restrict or control critical views expressed in media in Australia, including by censorship of content, or harassing and discrediting journalists, activists or politicians.

Example: Undermining open media reporting

The editors of a newspaper are pressured by their board to restrict coverage on a certain political issue. Unknown by the editors, a number of the board members have undisclosed links to a foreign government, and are seeking to reduce negative coverage on this political issue to align with the foreign government's stance. This skewed reporting slowly begins to undermine the public's awareness of the political issue and their trust in the outlet and Australian media.

What can you do to reduce the risk of foreign interference?

We all have a responsibility to counter foreign interference. We must be aware of the threat. Increasing our collective resilience against foreign interference is a shared responsibility.

The Australian government is working with individuals and sectors to implement mitigations and respond to acts of foreign interference.

Individuals

- If you feel threatened or unsafe in any way, contact the police:
 - using 000 for immediate threats; or
 - 13 14 44 for non-immediate threats.
- If you think you have been targeted by foreign interference activities, make a report to the National Security Hotline [[Australian National Security](#)]. You can report anonymously.
- Not everyone you meet online is who they say they are. Think carefully about the identity and motives of others, and potential risks before sharing information or entering into arrangements with new partners [[Think before you link | ASIO](#)].
- Be cyber safe [[Protect yourself | Cyber.gov.au](#)].
- Learn how to spot fake news and disinformation by checking against reliable media outlets. Be critical of information on social media and check biases.
- In the electoral context: stop and consider [[stop-and-consider-external-flyer.pdf \(aec.gov.au\)](#)]: is the information from a reliable source? When was it published? Could it be a scam?
- Report serious online abuse to the eSafety Commissioner at: <https://esafety.gov.au/report>.
- If you have concerns regarding inappropriate behaviour of diplomatic or consular officials in Australia report to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Protocol Branch at Protocol.branch@dfat.gov.au.
- If you are being asked to undertake activities on behalf of a foreign government, a foreign political organisation or a foreign government related entity or individual, consider if you need to register your activities under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme [[Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme | Attorney-General's Department](#)].
- Foreign interference can affect your mental health and wellbeing. The following support services are free, available 24/7, confidential and offer professional counselling.
 - Lifeline: 13 11 14
 - Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

Government and Industry

Protect yourself, your organisation, your reputation and your work by being aware of the threat and doing your due diligence before entering into new partnerships.

- NITRO (Notifiable Incidents, Threats or Reportable Observations) is another reporting mechanism. This is a secure internet portal created for non-security clearance holders to report concerns about potential espionage, foreign interference or insider threats related to the defence, education and Australian business sectors.
 - NITRO is available on ASIO's website at nitro.asio.gov.au.
- Inappropriate behaviour of foreign diplomatic or consular officials should be reported to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Protocol Branch at Protocol.branch@dfat.gov.au.
- Establish and maintain a strong security culture and have policies and procedures to protect people, information and assets from security risks [[Protective Security Policy Framework](#)].
- Have strong cyber security controls.
 - Report incidents to the Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) [[Report and recover | Cyber.gov.au](#)].
 - Register to be an ACSC Partner [[Australian Signals Directorate's Cyber Security Partnership Program | Cyber.gov.au](#)].
- Consider your insider threat risks and implement risk-based mitigations such as workforce screening, conflict of interest schemes, qualifications checks, audits, and fraud and ethics frameworks [[Countering the Insider Threat: A guide for Australian Government](#)].
- Check whether the home country of a company, individual or organisation is a prescribed foreign country or listed as high-risk by the Financial Action Task Force [[Home \(fatf-gafi.org\)](#)].
- Understand the intellectual property (IP) or research and development arrangements that will apply in any agreement, investment or partnership. Have a plan to protect IP, including against theft or unintended negative use [[Secure your success | ASIO](#)].
- For potential partners, board members and directors, or investors, consider the following.
 - Check the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Consolidated List of persons and entities listed under Australia's sanction regime [[Consolidated List | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(dfat.gov.au\)](#)].
 - Check the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme register [[Transparency Register - Transparency Register \(ag.gov.au\)](#)] to inform your understanding of what relationships an individuals or organisation may have with foreign governments, foreign political organisations and foreign government related individuals or entities.
 - Confirm that a company or organisation is appropriately registered. Locally, this can be confirmed through the Australian Business Register [[ABN Lookup \(business.gov.au\)](#)] and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission [[Search ASIC's Registers | ASIC](#)].
 - Confirm company and shareholding structures, parent owners and silent partners when considering entering a business relationship.
 - Consider what access to information, systems and technologies is being sought or will be provided in a business relationship and have effective clauses to end agreements.
 - Consider whether the legal regime of the home country of a company or organisation is fair and equitable, and whether the legal regime allows legal access to information and data by government and intelligence services.

What is the Government doing to counter foreign interference?

The Australian Government has implemented legislation and other measures to respond to the risks created by foreign interference and defend Australia's national interest.

Legislation

The Australian Government has a strong legal framework to criminalise acts of foreign interference. The *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Criminal Code) criminalises covert and deceptive or threatening activities by persons intending to:

- influence Australia's democratic systems and processes;
- influence the exercise of a democratic or political right or duty;
- support the intelligence activities of a foreign government; or
- prejudice Australia's national security.

Foreign interference is punishable by up to 20 years imprisonment under the Criminal Code.

The *Foreign Arrangements Scheme* ensures that the arrangements between public universities, state or territory governments and foreign entities do not adversely affect Australia's foreign relations and are consistent with Australia's foreign policy. For more information, visit [Foreign Arrangements](#).

The *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme*, established by the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018*, requires that individuals and entities register certain activities that are undertaken in Australia on behalf of a foreign principal. This provides the public with visibility of the nature, level and extent of foreign influence on Australia's government and politics. For more information, visit the [FITS webpage](#).

The *Foreign Investment Framework* reviews proposals above certain thresholds by foreign entities to invest in Australia, to ensure that foreign investments are not contrary to Australia's national interest. For more information, visit www.foreigninvestment.gov.au.

The *Protecting Australia's Critical Technology (PACT) Visa Screening Framework* ensures enhanced screening for visa applicants who wish to undertake study in critical technology related fields, protecting Australia's institutions from the unwanted transfer of critical technology.

Security of Critical Infrastructure (SOCI) Act 2018 outlines the legal obligations for those who own, operate, or have direct interests in critical infrastructure assets.

Additional Measures

Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce (CFI Taskforce)

Lead by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Federal Police, the CFI Taskforce leads Australia's operational response to espionage and foreign interference, and works to identify, assess, investigate, disrupt and, where possible, prosecute acts of foreign interference.

Counter Foreign Interference Coordination Centre (CFICC)

Within Home Affairs, CFICC supports the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator to coordinate whole of government efforts to counter foreign interference and provide leadership on CFI policy and outreach together with other agencies.

University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT)

UFIT brings together the university sector and Australian government agencies to work collaboratively to address the threat of foreign interference in the higher education sector.

Technology Foreign Interference Taskforce (TechFIT)

TechFIT brings together the technology sector and Australian Government agencies to work collaboratively to address the threat of foreign interference in critical technology sectors.

Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (EIAT)

The EIAT provides information and advice to the Australian Electoral Commissioner on matters that may impact the integrity of Australian federal electoral events, including from the real or perceived threat of foreign interference. For more information, visit the [Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce webpage](#).

Media / digital literacy initiatives

The Australian Government supports programs to build digital literacy, support public interest journalism and safeguard media diversity.