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Wong's Weak Response to Chinese Spy Case Slammed by Ex-AFP Officer

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Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Penny Wong, has drawn mixed responses following the arrest of a Chinese national in Canberra on charges of foreign interference. The individual, a woman who is a permanent Australian resident, was apprehended by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and charged under Australia's foreign interference laws. These charges carry a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison.

The case was announced in a joint AFP-ASIO statement released on August 5, 2025. Authorities allege that the accused attempted to engage in covert activities on behalf of a foreign power by collecting information on Australian defense and trade matters. ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess stressed the seriousness of the matter, stating that

foreign interference threatens the nation's sovereignty and must not be tolerated. While Burgess has previously warned of increased foreign espionage efforts in Australia, no official statistics were cited in the recent announcement to quantify the trend.

In response, Minister Wong held a press conference, reiterating the government's firm position against foreign interference. She stated that Australia would continue to uphold its democratic values while managing complex international relationships through diplomacy. Although she did not directly name China during the conference, her message underscored the seriousness with which the government is treating the matter.

Criticism of Wong's handling of the case has surfaced in some media outlets, though no public statement from any current or former AFP officials has been independently verified. Some commentators argue that avoiding direct condemnation of China may be perceived as cautious diplomacy, while others suggest it reflects a balanced approach to maintaining regional stability.

The case has reignited broader national discussions around Australia's relationship with China, especially given the economic interdependence between the two countries. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), China remains Australia's largest trading partner. However, official statistics specifically stating that China accounted for 56 percent of Western Australia's exports in 2024-25 could not be confirmed through publicly available DFAT data.

National security experts have long called for a careful balancing act. Professor John Blaxland of the Australian National University has previously emphasized the importance of protecting national security without jeopardizing critical economic relationships. Although he has not commented publicly on this specific case, the sentiment reflects ongoing policy challenges faced by the Australian government.

This latest incident marks only the third time charges have been laid under Australia's foreign interference laws, which were introduced in 2018 to address covert actions by foreign governments. It also represents the first case involving alleged interference within a community-based religious organization in the capital.

The case continues to evolve as the accused awaits court proceedings, and Australian authorities have reaffirmed their commitment to countering foreign threats in accordance with the law. The broader implications for Australia-China relations remain a subject of close public and diplomatic interest.