



Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Election Protocol Panel Retreat

July 26, 2021, 13:00 – 17:00, via CTSN

Objectives

- Review scenarios with other members of the Election Protocol Panel (Panel) in preparation for General Election 44 (GE44).

Run of Show

- This half-day retreat will convene members of the Panel to undertake a scenario-based exercise in preparation for GE44. Agenda will include: (1) introductory remarks; (2) CSIS and CSE public reports; (3) political party meeting debrief; (4) scenario exercise; and (5) wrap-up. Participants will include: Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet; Nathalie Drouin, Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General of Canada and Rob Stewart, Deputy Minister of Public Safety. David Morrison, Foreign and Defence Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister, will stand in for Vincent Rigby, former National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister.
- **Departmental Representative:** N.A.

Key Messages

- **CSIS and CSE public reports:** Congratulate Public Safety, particularly CSE and CSIS, for publishing public reports on foreign threats to elections ahead of GE44. Global Affairs was pleased to be consulted. These reports raise public awareness and build public resilience – our first and best line of defence against foreign interference.
- **Scenarios:** The most difficult scenarios are likely to involve disinformation, where it is difficult to determine whether the source is foreign or domestic, or where the two intersect.
- Global Affairs Canada has a specific role to play via the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada team, in terms of providing situational awareness to decision-makers, including the Panel, on foreign state sponsored disinformation online. This is gleaned from open source data analysis.
- Global Affairs Canada's RRM Canada team can also leverage its international partnerships to corroborate findings and exert diplomatic pressure, potentially through the G7.
- More broadly, Global Affairs Canada has a critical role to play in terms of response options where foreign states are implicated.
- It is important to recall that attribution to foreign state actors, especially in the short time timeframe of an election period, is difficult if not impossible.
- Likewise, determining the impact of a disinformation operation on the integrity of an election is extremely difficult.

Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This retreat follows a July 12 meeting of the Panel during which the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE) provided a classified threat briefing and the Panel discussed Panel operations and public communications.
- **CSIS and CSE public reports:** CSE published an updated *Cyber Threats to Canada's Democratic Process* public report on July 16, 2021; it published previous versions in 2017 and 2019. The report reviews global trends in cyber threat activity against democratic processes (including voters, political parties, and elections) and evaluates the threat to Canada, particularly in the context of COVID-19. It makes specific reference to China, Russia and Iran as threat actors. CSIS published its broader *Foreign Interference Threats to Canada's Democratic Process on July 22, 2021*. It talks about the rationale targets and techniques for foreign interference and speaks to the steps Canada is taking to counter it. It is country agnostic. GAC was consulted and provided input into both reports.

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- **Political Party Meeting Debrief:** PCO organised the first of a series of secret briefings for cleared political party representatives on threats to elections on July 22, 2021. PCO and SITE principles – including GAC/RRM – briefed; seven party representatives from the three largest parties participated. Questions included how the threat has changed since GE43 and how to report threats. The briefing was well-received by all.
- **Scenarios:** The scenarios are not yet available. They are designed to elicit discussion on: 1) developing a common understanding of the thresholds; 2) the mandate of the Panel and other players; and 3) considerations around making an announcement if threshold is met.
- The scenarios will likely cover different instances of possible threats to the integrity of GE44, both foreign and domestic or a combination of both. These instances could be a result of human intelligence operations, cyber threats or online disinformation campaigns, targeting the elections process itself, parties and politicians or the public. The scenarios will almost certainly relate to the current COVID context and public health.
- **Mandates:** The Panel is mandated to determine whether an incident or an accumulation of incidents has occurred that threatens Canada's ability to have a free and fair election, regardless of whether the incident or incidents are domestic or foreign in origin, or a combination of both. The Panel will receive reporting from a broad range of sources, including SITE, whose mandate is to report on foreign threats.
- **Thresholds and Public Communications:** The Panel's threshold for communicating with the public about threats to federal elections is very high, particularly during a writ period as the Caretaker Convention restricts the government's public communications. PCO is leading a communications framework which should address incidents that fall below the Panel's threshold but where communication is in the public interest. It is important to note that both media and a growing community of researchers will likewise be reporting publicly on possible threats. The Department's Communications branch is participating in both PCO's Director General communications table and SITE's working level communications table.

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