

For Public Release

SECRETMEMORANDUM FOR THE PRIME MINISTER

c.c.: Paul MacKinnon

**NATIONAL SECURITY BRIEFINGS TO PARLIAMENTARIANS**

(Decision Sought/Signature Required)

**SUMMARY**

- Briefings by Canada's security agencies to parliamentarians on both cyber threats and foreign interference in Canada would support informed debate on these issues and better position parliamentarians and political parties to protect themselves from such threats.
- This proposal includes unclassified briefings for all Members of the House of Commons and the Senate, as well as classified briefings to recognized party leaders, or interim leaders, in the House and up to three additional personnel, such as party officials or caucus members, by officials from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE). At the suggestion of your office in 2021, I have also proposed a similar invitation to the interim leader of the Green Party of Canada.
- s. 39 - Cabinet Confidence
- A similar proposal was submitted to your office in late 2020, but did not go forward as a result of the election in 2021, during which political parties received dedicated threat briefings from Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force.
- If you agree with these proposals, please sign the enclosed letters (**Tab A**), which request the support of both the Minister of Public Safety and the Minister of National Defence as the Ministers responsible for CSIS and CSE respectively. Please also sign the enclosed letters to Opposition Leaders (**Tab B**) advising them of the opportunity for classified briefings. **Do you agree?**

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SECRET**Background**

- Foreign interference is hostile activity undertaken by foreign states, typically covertly, against Canadians, residents of Canada, or Canadian institutions to further their own strategic interests or to damage Canadian interests. It is distinct from normal diplomatic conduct or acceptable lobbying activities.
- The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) has recommended in two separate reports in 2018 and 2019 that “[in] the interest of national security, members of the House of Commons and the Senate should be briefed upon being sworn-in and regularly thereafter on the risks of foreign interference and extremism in Canada.”
- Furthermore, the former President of the Queen’s Privy Council, when appearing before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs on 17 November 2020, offered that national security officials could provide a briefing to the committee on disinformation and foreign interference as it relates to Canadian democratic institutions. The briefing was never scheduled.
- On 18 November 2020, the House of Commons passed a Conservative opposition day motion calling on the Government to develop a plan to combat China’s “growing foreign operations here in Canada and its increasing intimidation of Canadians living in Canada”.
- Recently, media reports in mid-December 2021 outlined claims by the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) that candidates in 13 ridings were targetted by Chinese foreign interference during the 2021 General Election.
- After looking into the CPC claim, the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force was unable to conclude definitively that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) sought to covertly influence the 13 ridings in question. However, Chinese state media was observed running stories about the CPC platform and its impact on Canada-China relations. These narratives were also observed proliferating on social media (WECHAT).
- SITE found no intelligence indicating that these narratives were clandestinely orchestrated by the PRC. However, the PRC is known to conduct indirect operations through proxies who may act proactively to amplify known PRC positions without any tasking. SITE could not measure the impact of any potential or actual interference attempts, however, did report them to relevant security agencies and officials responsible for overseeing the integrity of the election.

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- CSIS and CSE officials briefed the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN) on foreign interference during an *in camera* meeting on February 7, 2022.

**Proposal**

- In view of the seemingly growing threat in the cyber domain and from other forms of foreign interference, including to Canada's political parties and parliamentarians, it is proposed that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) provide briefings as follows:
  - The Ministers of Public Safety and National Defence invite all Members of Parliament and Senators to attend unclassified briefings. Such briefings could raise the level of awareness generally among parliamentarians as to the threats to Canada and Canadians, including to parliamentarians themselves. Given the COVID situation, these briefings could be conducted virtually.
  - There would also be significant value in providing individual SECRET-level briefings to each of the leaders, or interim leaders, of recognized parties in the House of Commons, which would serve to highlight more specific risks, including to political parties themselves. At your discretion, a similar offer could also be extended to the interim leader of the Green Party of Canada.
  - To enable the leaders and/or their political parties to act on the information provided, the leaders should be invited to identify up to three additional individuals (e.g. caucus or party officials) to participate in these briefings. Accordingly, I propose that you sign the letters at **Tab B** to advise opposition leaders of this opportunity. In so doing, you would authorize officials to coordinate with Opposition Leaders' offices, including the preparation of temporary access waivers and confidentiality agreements by the Privy Council Office Chief Security Officer. Such agreements must be signed by the Leaders and their invitees in order for them to receive classified information. You may also wish to consider designating officials to receive the same briefings on behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada.

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SECRET**Considerations**

- Foreign interference and cyber threats in Canada are not limited to individuals or entities in the executive branch of government. As lawmakers and politicians, all Members of Parliament are at risk of targeting by foreign interference actors and cyber operations, as are many of their constituents.
- Unclassified briefings to all parliamentarians would enhance their understanding of the growing cyber and foreign interference threats to Canada and Canadians. Building awareness of these threats is an important means to improve Canadian resilience against them.
- These briefings may also serve as a first step towards implementing previous NSICOP recommendations and, if successful, could be a model for subsequent briefings on other issues of national security concern, such as extremism.
- Based on the experience of previous federal elections, some Party Leaders may choose not to accept an invitation to classified briefings. Nevertheless, I believe it is in the best interest of Canadian democracy to brief any and all who will commit to such a briefing.

Jody Thomas

**Attachments**

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