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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRIME MINISTER
c.c. John Hannaford, Natalie G. Drouin, Daniel Rogers

GAC RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISM REPORT
WECHAT DISINFORMATION ABOUT MP MICHAEL CHONG

(For information)

SUMMARY

- Global Affairs Canada's (GAC) Rapid Response Mechanism Canada (RRM Canada) produced a report detailing online activity directed at MP Michael Chong.
- RRM Canada identified a network on the WeChat platform, circulating disinformation related to MP Chong. The report indicates that many of the implicated WeChat accounts are based in China and may have links to the state; there is no conclusive evidence of the PRC government's involvement in the online activity.
- In response to the activity outlined in the RRM Canada report, the Deputy Minister Committee on Intelligence Response proposed that MP Chong be notified of the disinformation directed at him and the online activity observed on WeChat.
- Once MP Chong has been informed, GAC will conduct a diplomatic engagement with the PRC to convey Canada's concerns, and will provide a media statement to requesting journalists with a public version of the report.
- Deputies also proposed that the RRM report and data be shared with academia for further analysis. PCO assesses that it may not be feasible to share the information expeditiously in this instance, however PCO and GAC will explore how to best create these information sharing pathways for the future.

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Background

RRM Canada

- The G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM Canada) was created at the Charlevoix Summit in June 2018 in order to strengthen coordination to identify and respond to foreign threats to democracies, including disinformation. Since its inception, the RRM Canada has focused primarily on countering foreign disinformation online.
- Through social media analysis, RRM Canada identified a network on the WeChat platform, circulating disinformation in an apparent campaign directed at Member of Parliament Michael Chong.
- On June 28, RRM Canada produced a report about the activity targeting MP Chong on WeChat. This report was shared with Deputies at DMCIR on June 29, 2023.

Report

- The RRM Canada report, entitled "*WeChat Account Activity Targeting Canadian Parliamentarian Suggests Likely State Involvement*" (**TAB A**), states that the RRM Canada "has detected an information operation on WeChat directed at Member of Parliament Michael Chong, conducted between May 4-13."
- The report asserts that the operation coincided with Canada's designation of Chinese diplomat Zhao Wei as *persona non grata* (PNG), on May 8, and subsequent designation by the People's Republic of China (PRC) of a Canadian diplomat as PNG, which occurred the following day.
- RRM Canada's analysis details how a network of 75 WeChat news accounts circulated 115 articles that featured false narratives regarding MP Chong. A subset of the same network published and amplified narratives regarding the Canadian diplomat. According to RRM Canada, among the network are known state-media outlets and accounts that are likely linked to the PRC state apparatus.
- Given the inherent limitations of RRM Canada's open-source methodology, the report acknowledged that RRM Canada was not able to identify conclusive evidence of the PRC government's role in the information operation.

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Considerations

- The Deputy Minister Committee on Intelligence Response discussed the RRM Canada report on June 29. The Committee recommended that MP Chong be briefed on the disinformation activity directed at him as outlined in the report. PCO supports this recommendation and proposes the following officials be asked to brief MP Chong (either together or one individual from the list):
 - Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, as the department is responsible for the RRM Canada.
 - Deputy Minister of Public Safety, as the lead department on foreign interference.
 - National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister.
- While the analysis included in the RRM Canada report is not classified, and is based on publicly available information, the report content is sensitive. The report was intended for the security and intelligence audience and was not drafted to be public facing. If MP Chong is briefed on the report's findings, it is possible that he will share the allegations of disinformation publicly.
- The May 2023 *Ministerial Direction on Threats to the Security of Canada Directed at Parliament and Parliamentarians* by the Minister of Public Safety instructs the national security and intelligence community to ensure that parliamentarians are informed of threats to the security of Canada directed at them.
 - RRM's mandate to monitor disinformation in the context of Canadian elections (as part of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force) is limited in scope, and further, Canadian security and intelligence agencies do not have corresponding requirements to monitor this threat. This mandate gap creates a collection and reporting bias in that RRM reporting cannot be corroborated or refuted by other Canadian intelligence. As such, the risk exists of creating a precedent in briefing parliamentarians on incomplete, unverified and unchallenged information.
 - In recognition of the multiple ways in which disinformation can be used by threat actors, including within Canada and on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, the ability for security and intelligence agencies to monitor disinformation campaigns against parliamentarians is limited by mandate and capacity. There is the risk of setting a precedent that the community cannot continue to uphold.

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- The Deputy Minister Committee on Intelligence Response proposed sharing the RRM report and data with academia for further analysis. Initial consultations between GAC, PCO Democratic Institutions Secretariat and PCO Security and Intelligence Secretariat indicate that no current vehicle exists to share this type of information quickly. The existing relationships RRM and PCO Democratic Institutions Secretariat have with academia have a different area of focus, or are not yet mature enough, to be leveraged for this type of analysis.
 - It is unclear what added value academia may bring to the specific data collected by RRM for this report; it is extremely unlikely that academia would be able to collect further data, or that differing conclusions would be drawn.
 - A new program, such as a targeted academic grant or contribution initiative, may be considered for future instances where the Government may wish to leverage academic analysis. This would be a new initiative and would require thorough policy development, concrete objectives, Cabinet endorsement and identified funding.
- GAC has advised that they are preparing responsive communications to address any media queries should RRM Canada's findings be made public, including a releasable version of the report that could be released to media if required. Note, RRM Canada routinely receives ATIP requests for all of their reporting.
- GAC is evaluating the feasibility of establishing a relationship with WeChat to address concerns regarding the use of the platform to spread mis- and disinformation targeting Canadians and Canadian interests.

PCO Comment

- The report is dated June 28, 2023. MP Chong should be informed of the report's findings as soon as possible.

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- PCO notes that the RRM Canada report does not provide conclusive evidence indicating that the PRC is responsible for the campaign of disinformation directed at MP Chong. Any briefing provided to MP Chong or any public messaging on the report results should clearly indicate that fact, and the information should be appropriately contextualised.
- Although the Deputy Minister Committee on Intelligence Response proposed that the RRM report and data be shared with academia to conduct further analysis, PCO assesses that the desire to share RRM information quickly may not be feasible at this time. GAC, PCO Security and Intelligence and PCO Democratic Institutions Secretariat will endeavour to explore this option for the future and to seek direction from the Deputies for next steps.
- GAC notes that the relationship with the PRC has been strained, and there is a risk of aggravating tensions should the allegations of a disinformation campaign be made public. GAC will engage with diplomatic counterparts to indicate Canada's concern with the apparent use of PRC-state media in the observed activity on WeChat.
- PCO supports GAC's recommendation for a responsive communications approach. Should awareness of the report enter the public environment, GAC will be prepared with responsive messaging and a releasable version of the report which could be provided to media upon request. If required, this could further be supported by a technical briefing to media by officials.
- The following sequence of actions are proposed:
 - Inform MP Chong of RRM Canada's findings in the report, and the other actions the Government of Canada is undertaking to counter the activity;
 - Diplomatic engagement with the PRC to convey Canada's concerns with the observed activity on WeChat, and indicate Canada's desire to engage with WeChat directly to counter disinformation; and
 - Responsive communications activities beginning with the media statement.
- PCO will continue to work with key stakeholders within the security and intelligence community to counter disinformation.

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Jody Thomas

Attachment

Tab A – RRM Canada Report, *“WeChat Account Activity Targeting Canadian Parliamentarian Suggests Likely State Involvement”*

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