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JUNE 2023

SITE TF UPDATE

SITE THREAT ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE THREATS TO CANADIAN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS—2023

This assessment covers the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE TF) observations of foreign threat actors' intentions and activities relating to Foreign Interference (FI) since the 44th Canadian General Election (GE44) in September 2021. Activities that occurred prior to September 2021, but that SITE TF became aware of [] are also included in this update. While domestic terrorism threats are not strictly part of the SITE TF mandate, we recognize the need to provide assessments on this issue, therefore, an Annex on the domestic violent extremism landscape is included as part of this threat update. (S//CEO)

Key Assessments

- Sophisticated, pervasive and persistent FI activities constitute a serious threat to Canada's national security and the integrity of Canada's democratic institutions. For certain foreign states, FI activities are part of their normal pattern of behaviour in Canada and often peak during election periods. (S//CEO)
- Certain foreign states employ FI activities to influence Canadian politics by i) deceptively supporting individuals who are perceived to be receptive to foreign state interests, and ii) opposing individuals who are perceived to be against these foreign states. To accomplish their goals, threat actors exploit loopholes in political party nomination processes; engage in money and financing operations; mobilize and leverage community organizations; manipulate media outlets, including social media; and, engage in cyber threat activity. (S//CEO)
- The People's Republic of China (PRC), India, Russia and Pakistan have engaged in FI activities in Canada since the GE44 in September 2021—the PRC and India being the most active. PRC FI activities in future Canadian elections will likely employ greater clandestine and deceptive elements []
[] Government of India (GoI) [] its use of disinformation as a key FI tactic against Canada. (S//CEO)

The Threat

1. FI involves the use of clandestine or deceptive practices that are meant to influence Canadian policymaking, public narratives and civil society in a way that obfuscates the role and interests of the foreign state or actor. FI is not the same as diplomatic activity. Traditional diplomacy works through recognized channels to achieve specific policy outcomes or objectives (e.g., trade negotiations with the United States). However, diplomats from some states routinely engage in activities that cross the line from acceptable overt diplomatic engagement to clandestine malign interference. FI often takes place in what is referred to as a legal and normative grey zone. These are activities which fall beneath legal thresholds; for which there are no laws regulating the activity; or where the interpretation of the activities, and the permissibility of those activities, is ambiguous. (S//CEO)

Foreign Interference

SITE TF defines Foreign Interference (FI) as: "activity conducted or supported by a foreign state/actor that is detrimental to Canadian national interests and is clandestine, deceptive or involves a threat to a person." (U)

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2. Foreign states engaging in FI target all levels of government in Canada—including federal, provincial, municipal and Indigenous—and various facets of Canadian civil society (e.g., diaspora groups, the general public, media entities). FI activities also transcend party lines, ideologies and ethnic backgrounds. (S//CEO)
3. Canada is a high-priority FI target for four primary reasons: i) Canada is an important member of the Five-Eyes community—a grouping of significant interest to some foreign states, given its intelligence collection capabilities—and other key alliances and international bodies (e.g., G7, NATO); ii) Canada has a robust international reputation that can be used or co-opted to help legitimize foreign state interests; iii) Canada is a reliable and open trading partner with an advanced, knowledge-based economy that can support foreign state development objectives, particularly in science and technology; and iv) Canada is home to large diaspora communities, which some foreign states seek to monitor, control, and leverage in furtherance of their strategic goals. (S//CEO)
4. Foreign states develop important relationships in Canada year round to further their own political platforms, and will use these relationships to their advantage notably around election time. As elections are integral to the proper functioning of liberal democratic societies, they are peak times for FI activities as they represent a 'window of opportunity' for foreign states to influence or sway electoral outcomes. (S//CEO)

Office of Protocol at Global Affairs Canada

At the outset of Canadian Federal Elections, the Office of Protocol at Global Affairs Canada (GAC) sends a letter to the foreign heads of missions, embassies and consulates, international organizations and special representative offices in Canada reminding them that: "consistent with Article 41 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and Article 55 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, they have the duty to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving state and not to interfere in the internal affairs of the receiving state." This letter is sent in accordance with standard practices for the Office of Protocol at GAC and was last done on August 20, 2021 ahead of the federal elections that year. Full text of the letter is available on request. (U//OUO)

Methodologies/Tools

5. Foreign states may employ FI and seek to influence Canadian politics by clandestinely supporting candidates or elected officials perceived to be receptive to the foreign state policies, narratives and geopolitical strategies. At the same time, these foreign states also actively oppose individuals who are perceived to be against their interests. Foreign states may target all levels of government (federal, provincial, territorial and municipal), as well as Canadian communities. The following represents key methodologies used by foreign states to interfere in Canadian democratic institutions: (S//CEO)

Exploiting loopholes in political party nomination processes

6. Nomination processes for political parties in Canada are not directly regulated by federal or provincial government legislation or enforcement bodies (e.g., Elections Canada and the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections). Each political party sets and enforces its own rules, and party members can vote in nomination races, regardless of their legal status in Canada. For example, individuals who are not Canadian citizens—and therefore cannot vote in elections at any level of government in Canada—can still vote in a party nomination process as long as they are party members. In some instances, the membership fee is paid for, or reimbursed by, a hostile state actor (HSA) or its proxies. The nomination process can be critical as many ridings in Canada are considered 'safe seats' that have long been held by a particular political party. In other words, gaining a party's nomination in a riding that has long supported that party is akin to winning the subsequent election. Therefore, FI activities during the nomination race could achieve the desired outcome without reliance upon FI activities during

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the election period. FI actors exploit this loophole to engage in FI that target specific candidates and particular electoral ridings. (S)

Money and financing operations

7. FI actors also channel monetary donations and other material assistance to preferred candidates in elections, with the intent of fostering a bond of obligation by the candidate to the foreign state and/or its proxies. This is usually done via trusted interlocutors such as proxy agents or co-opted community organizations. The sense of obligation can then be leveraged for privileged access to the official and for policy positions that are in the national interests of the foreign state—and may be to the detriment of Canada. Furthermore, this bond serves to solidify foreign state proxies as gatekeepers for community support. If the preferred candidate pursues a course of action contrary to that of the foreign state, community support would likely be withdrawn and the candidate could potentially lose the next election. (S)

Mobilizing and leveraging community organizations

8. Local community networks are a key vector for facilitating FI activities. For example, PRC officials often conduct FI activities through local networks that are tied to—but not necessarily directed by—PRC officials in Canada on a regular basis. Key components of these FI networks usually include i) PRC officials in Canada ii) leaders of local Chinese Canadian community groups; iii) staff of targeted candidates/elected officials; and, iv) political candidates/officials themselves. This network structure—used for interference at all levels of government—enables an adaptable, resilient approach to extending and enabling PRC covert influence. The role played by each component varies by location and campaign, and much of the assistance rendered is likely shielded intentionally from broad public scrutiny. (S)

Manipulate media outlets

9. Traditional and online media outlets, including social media, play an important role during election periods, offering a curated communications channel between political campaigns and the general public. As such, they are a target for FI activities that seek to manipulate and influence key media entities, control narratives, and disseminate disinformation. (S)

10. In Canada, a PRC “takeover” of Chinese-language media has transpired over decades, derivative of the proportion of PRC-origin individuals increasing in Canada’s Chinese communities and as the PRC devotes more resources to, in President Xi Jinping’s words, “telling China’s story well”. For example, in December 2020, a former editor-in-chief of one of Canada’s most popular Chinese language newspapers, explicitly stated, “Beijing has become the mainstream now in Chinese newspapers or magazine here [in Canada]... I cannot find a real independent and non-partisan newspaper here [in Canada] reporting Chinese affairs. I cannot find one for you”. (S)

11. Technological advancements put AI and AI-generated content at the forefront of enhancing foreign electoral interference efforts which aim to control narratives, shape public opinion, and/or discredit factual information. These AI-enabled efforts include the creation of chat bots and content for social media that targets marginalized or racialized communities, the production of deepfake videos or imagery of elected officials or public figures, or to generate fabricated digital representations of human beings (i.e., “avatars”) providing false “news” content. Further, “smart” propaganda platforms that leverage AI and big data analytics can be used to improve foreign state actors’ ability to identify and counter undesirable online sentiments during an election cycle and optimize amplification of counter-narratives to make them the accepted “truth”. SITE assesses that influence campaigns that leverage AI have the potential to be highly effective and can be a major tool of foreign interference in upcoming elections, possibly even in Canada. (TS/[])

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JUNE 2023*Cyber threat activity*

12. Consistent with the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Federal election, there is no evidence of a significant specific cyber threat to Canadian elections infrastructure or electoral processes posed by state actors [] Political parties, candidates and their staff continue to be targeted by cyber threat activity, however, and this may take the form of cyber espionage, disinformation, or deepfakes. (U)

Threat Actors***People's Republic of China:***

13. The PRC is the most active state actor engaging in FI activities in Canada. FI activities are part of the PRC's normal pattern of behaviour and are active at all times. PRC FI actors are largely pragmatic and tend to pursue paths of least resistance by supporting whichever party or individual is believed to be 'friendliest' to the PRC's interests. As described under the FI methodology *Mobilizing and leveraging community organizations* above, PRC FI activity is often conducted through local networks that are tied to—but not necessarily directed by—a PRC Consulate on a regular basis. (S//CEO)

14. The CCP in particular uses Canada and Canadians to proactively support PRC interests; this includes rejecting and publicly criticizing US policies—specifically those harmful to the PRC, supporting international PRC initiatives (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Security Initiative), positively portraying the PRC and the CCP, and exhibiting a general 'deference' to the PRC's authority and interests. (S//CEO)

15. []

FI activities – PRC:

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- *Redacted text indicates the PRC may adjust their FI strategies over time to maximize their influence over democratic processes.*

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- [Redacted]

- [Redacted]

- *Redacted text describes an example of a Canadian politician at the municipal level appearing to espouse certain narratives relating to the "Five Poisons".*

[Redacted]

Five Poisons

The "Five Poisons" is a term used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to refer to five groups that are viewed as a significant threat to the stability and legitimacy of the CCP to rule China:

- 1) Falun Gong members
- 2) Uyghurs
- 3) Tibetans
- 4) Individuals who are pro-Taiwan
- 5) Individuals who are pro-democracy (U)

- *Redacted text provides an example of potential PRC interference in a municipal democratic process.*

[Redacted]

- *Redacted text provides an example of potential PRC interference in a provincial democratic process.*

[Redacted]

- *Redacted text describes an example of a Canadian politician at the provincial level appearing to self-censor in relation to certain issues relating to the "Five Poisons".*

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[Redacted]

- *Redacted text provides an example of potential PRC interference in a federal democratic process.*

[Redacted]

- [Redacted]

[Redacted]

- [Redacted]

CSIS intelligence on the GE44, collected and assessed after the conclusion of the federal election:

- [Redacted]

- [Redacted]

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India:

16. India [] the second-most active state actor engaging in FI activities in Canada, behind the PRC. While the Government of India's (Gol's) FI activities are [] they are nonetheless persistent, pervasive and evolving. Indian FI activity is largely focused on the Indo-Canadian diaspora communities; however, the Gol is also opportunistic and will seek to leverage prominent non-Indo-Canadians to achieve India's FI goals, where it suits India's interests. SITE assesses that the Gol seeks to covertly influence Canadian officials at all levels of government to take positions and decisions that are favourable to the Gol. Indian officials rely on a network of Canada-based proxy and pro-Gol actors, including community organizations, []

17. Gol officials remain particularly concerned with India's image abroad, so a priority for the Gol in its FI strategy is countering all activities and narratives it considers 'anti-India,' as well as perceived anti-Hindu sentiment, []

18. Disinformation is a key tool for the Gol in achieving its FI objectives, []

Indian disinformation would be aimed at supporting the election of pro-Gol candidates and undermining the campaigns of perceived 'anti-India' candidates, and such Gol actions would be considered deceptive and clandestine activity that is detrimental to Canadian interests. (S//CEO)

19. [] -its use of disinformation as a key FI tactic against Canada, []

[] reporting examples – India:

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[] pressure at the hands of Gol officials and their
proxies are likely to be used opportunistically during elections at all levels of government. (TS//CEO)

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- *Information indicates that a GoI proxy agent may have attempted to interfere in democratic processes, reportedly including through clandestine provision of illicit financial support to various Canadian politicians as a means of attempting to secure the election of pro-GoI candidates or gaining influence over candidates who take office. Any such financial contribution could have remained unknown to the candidate.*

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Russia:

20. Russia has focused its FI activities globally on discrediting democratic institutions and processes, with an ultimate goal of destabilizing or delegitimizing democratic states. Russia has the capability to engage in FI against Canada, however, it lacks the intent as Canada is not perceived as an existential threat to Russia in the same way as the United States (its "main adversary"). Russia does not prefer a particular Canadian political party or leader through which Russian FI could be directed. The Kremlin likely assesses that major Canadian federal parties do not differ significantly in their stance toward Russia. (S//CEO)

21. As part of its foreign-influenced operations, Russia carries out disinformation efforts in the West. Russian intelligence services (RIS) and other state-linked actors conduct disinformation and information campaigns to achieve Moscow's strategic goals, question the integrity of—and undermine public faith in—Western governments and institutions, sow discord, stoke fear and anxiety, and weaken cohesion in Western societies. (S)

[] reporting examples – **Russia:**

- Since the reinvansion of Ukraine in February 2022, [] Russian *officials* in Canada [] spread pro-Russian narratives and counter Canada's stance and policies in regards to the conflict in Ukraine. Russian officials have made an effort to influence Canadians by casting doubt regarding the Western narrative on the war in Ukraine, denouncing and discrediting the GC's support to Ukraine and actions of Ukraine, and distracting public opinion from other Russian actions. (S)

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Pakistan:

22. [] Pakistan's FI strategy in Canada is to promote stability in Pakistan and counter India's growing influence. []

23. Pakistan poses an FI threat to the integrity of Canada's political system and democratic institutions, through its attempts to target and influence the GC and Canadian fundamental institutions (CFIs) —including [] MPs and public servants—toward pro-Government of Pakistan (GoP) positions and policies. (S//CEO)

24. [] Pakistan's FI strategy going forward will likely be influenced by the ongoing political, security and economic challenges facing Pakistan. []

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2019 CSIS Threat Reduction Measure

CSIS has undertaken a Threat Reduction Measure in order to reduce GoP's FI activities related to Canada's democratic processes.

[] reporting examples – Pakistan:

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SITE TF will continue to monitor and provide updates on activities relating to FI threats to Canadian democratic institutions.
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