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MEMO

Date: Wednesday, May 17, 2023
To: Erin O'Toole
From: Justin Bumstead
Subject: Foreign Influence Tactics in 2021 Election

It will come as no surprise to anyone working on campaigns and elections to hear that the Canadian political system is vulnerable to foreign interference. Local campaigns face three constraints that limit their ability to influence and persuade electors. State actors face fewer constraints on time, money and staff. The unfortunate reality is that motivated governments or non-government actors can't be controlled or regulated. An overworked and under-resourced Elections Canada simply cannot identify nor prevent this type of interference.

Ultimately, it comes down to voter contact and the ability of a party to get its message in front of as many voters as possible. This works either as persuasion messages, or in the case of specific allegations from this campaign, dissuasion. It is straightforward for governments to use local contacts to push messages in controlled environments such as WeChat or WhatsApp groups. It is impossible to track these conversations without having a friendly presence in the group. We need to understand and find a way to be present in these chats and in these communities.

Thinking back to the 2018 campaign, there were unanswered questions about the strength of the local campaign in Don Valley North. Campaigns face constraints, and we must recognize the ability of non-friendly actors to influence campaigns that face these constraints. If the Consulate were to provide financial incentives to 'volunteers', it would fall outside of spending limits and allow the campaign to reach far more voters than competing campaigns. This candidate was ultimately successful, despite serious doubts about the chances in the riding. To borrow the line from the late Senator Finley, there are three things that you will always be short on in politics - time, treasure, and talent. Unfortunately, in a competitive environment that offers little recompense for second place, these finite resources will be focused on the core objective. Finding supporters, and mobilizing them.

In the specific context of the 2021 campaign, there were a couple specific incidents that could be classified as either influence or interference. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we didn't have time to investigate these properly.

- 1. Polling Panels & Bots:** We flagged this in an early meeting, and I'd forgotten about it until today. Our systems caught automated 'bots' completing our surveys due to certain patterns in the open text responses. At the time, we thought it was just a bot focused on collecting the \$0.50 survey incentives but these could easily have been malicious. These responses were set aside and we strengthened our processes, but this would be an effective way to change a narrative.

If I were looking to shape party or government policy, stacking these panels with automated respondents to swamp policy questions related to foreign policy would be an effective way to do it. This would be a machine learning (AI) problem, but one easily within the capability of certain

actors. The media place too great an emphasis on polling without realizing the shortcomings of the panels that underpin this work.

2. **Mail-In Ballots:** This was alleged to be an issue in the recent BC campaign. Organizers in specific communities were alleged to have requested ballots on behalf of electors. These ballots were completed by community bosses and cast on their behalf.

When we received the first list of people requesting mail-in ballots, we noticed surprisingly high numbers in a couple of predominantly Chinese mail-in ballots. Two specific ridings - Richmond Centre and Steveston Richmond East jumped out, as they had comparatively lower numbers of mail-in ballots in the BC election. SRE was also the riding of former MP Joe Peschisolido, alleged to have staff affiliated with the United Front.

We requested the files from Party IT, and found ~1,500 voters that hadn't voted in the 2019 election, and ~500 that didn't appear on the 2019 list of electors. These could easily be new citizens casting their first ballot, but it could also be an easy way for an outside actor to find ballots that wouldn't be used. These ballots could either be requested on behalf of the residents without their knowledge, or done with specific instruction (intimidation) by a motivated actor. We didn't have a chance to look into this as thoroughly as we wanted. It was passed onto the field guys, but nothing came of it. Again, finite resources.

If the resources and interest was there, the way to track this would be to check the IPs of those requesting mail-in ballots. This would offer an easy indication of mischief. It would also be possible to confirm that these electors requested the ballot themselves, either with in person interviews or phone calls. If these electors are either unaware, or are afraid of discussing it, it could be an indicator.

3. **Intimidation / Influence:** Most of this would fall into grey areas. Direct contact between foreign agents and electors would be unlikely, but it is easy enough to have Canadian staff employed by shell corporations "volunteering" full time on behalf of local campaigns or candidates. It doesn't even have to be directly affiliated – businesses that are either friendly to a foreign interest or can be pushed to support a cause/candidate will comply. This could mean advertising space, distribution, or soft pushes at community or religious centres.

A focused effort on the ground will find these instances. We received reports from Scarborough of business owners pushing employees to vote Liberal, among other complaints, but these after often just hearsay. Given the limitations on in-person contact due to COVID, every campaign was more dependent on digital operations. Chinese control over platforms like WeChat provides them the ability to limit messages they find uncomfortable, and amplify voices and candidates in line with their objectives.

Without building social listening tools and recruiting additional language skills, it will be very difficult to limit our exposure. We're also limited by our own sources, as Conservative friendly voices (e.g., Falun Gong) in the Chinese community may have a vested interest in making allegations against anyone they believe is friendly to the CCP.

An Aggressive Path: If they chose an aggressive path, they could obtain a copy of the list of electors from a local campaign. They could match it to data on Chinese controlled platforms (the same way platforms like Facebook allow the use of "custom audiences", and find individuals in ridings that could be pushed to support a cause or candidate. This would be pushed through local staff pushing messaging on WeChat and other platforms. It could be funded either with cash, or with companies controlled by friendly or persuadable people in the ridings.

[Attachment]

Attachment

From: Justin Bumstead [REDACTED]
Date: May 17, 2023 at 9:29:02 AM EDT
To: Erin O'Toole [REDACTED]
Subject: Understanding the Why and How

Hey,

The more I've considered these questions, the more I think it will be necessary to answer the question of 'Why'. I had an Eastern European colleague describe Canadian society to me as 'high trust'. The same characteristics that make us an open and trusting society make us vulnerable to exploitation. The question we need to answer is how we can solve these challenges without losing part of who we are. This isn't about specific incidents in a specific election. This is about understanding Canada's strategic vulnerabilities as we move into an unpredictable and dangerous world. We aren't going to solve this problem until we come to a shared understanding of what that problem actually is.

The first question the rapporteur needs to answer is the **Why**. Why would foreign states have an interest in interfering in our democratic process? What would they stand to gain? To borrow the old line, we need to walk a mile in their shoes and understand their motivations. This means ridding ourselves of outdated notions of western supremacy and accepting that rising powers will pursue their interests the same way they've viewed applications of American power during the War on Terror. If the international system allows major powers to act above the rule of law, why should new powers offer that same deference?

So what is China's why? What do they think they'll be able to achieve? Under Pierre Trudeau, Canada's attempt at non-alignment served Chinese interests by weakening a common front among western democracies. When Canada was pursuing 'sunny ways' in the 2015 election, China was growing increasingly worried as the United States turned towards Donald Trump's hostile rhetoric. The potential for major conflict is openly acknowledged in Chinese doctrine. The more urgent the threat, the greater the willingness to act. If they believe themselves to be under threat, and they believe they can peel off American allies, or at least weaken the collective resolve, they have every motivation to take big risks to advance their position. Growing anti-American sentiment in Canada following Trump's election created that opportunity.

The Chinese political class is far more pragmatic than is often appreciated. We saw this with Deng's 'black cat white cat, as long as it catches mice'. We saw the willingness to take serious action in Tiananmen in 89. We saw the frustration with the alleged hypocrisy of the global order following the Kosovo air war and the US invasion of Iraq. We saw the frustration with American economic policy during the crisis in 2008 and the secondary international impacts. We can see the preparation for a final showdown in the construction projects in the South China Sea. You don't build air defense systems in heavily contested waters if you have faith in the ability of the global order to prevent conflict. We saw this at the start of the pandemic when United Front operatives were alleged to have bought up Canadian PPE, leaving Canada less prepared for what would come. The internal factional fights within the CCP have largely been resolved, but this means that the most powerful voices now are either personally tied to Xi, or to factions of the military and intelligence communities that have a different understanding of China's role in the wider world.

To the credit of the Chinese political class, the policy flexibility that has been demonstrated over the past few decades speaks to a willingness to learn. And they will learn the lessons from Ukraine. Our own lack of seriousness means that even if we wanted to, we'd have little to offer Taiwan in the event of a major conflict, but keeping Canada on the sidelines in that eventuality benefits China and forces the United States to view Canada as a potential threat vector rather than an ally. And as we saw in WW2 (Alaska Highway), when the United States is focused on a goal, very little will stand in their way. In 2002, when the United States viewed Canada as a potential source of terror financing and safe havens, we saw the thickening of the border. The arrogance of the end of history means that we're unprepared for what might come, and if we don't get a handle on this problem, we'll end up (more) beholden to outside powers that disregard Canada's own interest. We either solve this problem now, or we accept that it will get worse.

Thinking of Ontario PC MPP Vincent Ke, he served on a bunch of legislative committees, including public appointments. This would have provided him the ability to block appointments by the Ontario government that were deemed to be hostile to Beijing. While these actions would have been subtle and difficult to detect, they would have offered concrete benefit to the Chinese government. Political outcomes are the product of thousands of small actions that work towards a common goal, and placing individuals in key positions provides both a flexibility and freedom of action that is underappreciated.

Foreign interference in Canada's political system allows powers, both friendly and hostile, to shape our direction. If we cede this responsibility, we will find ourselves in circumstances that don't service the interests of Canadians and leave us more and more vulnerable in a more and more dangerous world.

I've recommended this book to a bunch of folks. I read it in spring 2016, before the allegations of Russian interference re: the Trump campaign.

[Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy: Van Herpen, Marcel H.: 9781442253612: Books - Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca/dp/9781442253612)

It would likely be worth having the Rapporteur contact the author, as it goes through a couple decades of soft interference by Soviet and Russian intelligence. It outlines the diverse manners by which hostile actors can shape and influence electoral outcomes. There is a particularly terrifying story of a young British political staffer that is ensnared by Soviet intelligence in the 70s, only to have them support the individual's career and political ambitions (including electing them as an MP) until British intelligence allegedly blocked this person's appointment to the national security committee.

I've had the pleasure and misfortune of having a front row seat to way too many elections. The 2022 UCP leadership race gutted the ability of the party to prepare for the current campaign, and we see this in the challenges facing party systems. The same way public infrastructure needs continual repair and maintenance, party and regulatory databases require the same upkeep and commitment. The problem is that these systems are expensive to build and difficult to maintain. Limitations on resources are real, and the chaos of politics limits our ability to build long term safeguards. Our approach to political campaigns hasn't changed in generations. In training seminars, you'll still here the line from Abraham Lincoln outlining the foundations of a political campaign. These haven't changed. Find people that support you. Persuade the ones that aren't sure. Encourage them all to go and vote.

The risk we face is that Canadian politics will end up guided by self-interested diasporic groups more focused on issues from their country of origin than on issues facing Canada as a whole. We can dive deep into the specific actions that parties and government can take to build certain specific safeguards, but

without a shared understanding on why we are facing the situation we are facing, it'll end up as a partisan mess and ultimately leave us no closer to where we need to be. I'll send another note with the safeguards I think make sense. But, until we can get a clear focus on the "why", which means tough conversations about the other countries dabbling in our politics above and beyond China, we're not going to be any closer to solving this.

My two cents, not sure its even worth that.

MEMO

Date: Friday, September 24, 2021
To: Jim Ross
Cc: [REDACTED]
From: Sadiq Valliani
Subject: Foreign Interference in Our Election

There is a strong case to be made that there was a degree of influence exerted by an outside actor in the Chinese community during the 44th General Election. From speaking with campaign teams and regional organizers, we believe this influence negatively impacted our standing in these seats:

Metro Vancouver

- Richmond Centre
- Steveston—Richmond East
- Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam
- Fleetwood—Port Kells

Greater Toronto Area

- Markham—Stouffville
- Markham—Unionville
- Richmond Hill
- Willowdale
- Don Valley North
- Scarborough—Agincourt
- Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill
- Newmarket—Aurora
- Mississauga—Centre (to a certain extent)

Through message groups in WeChat text-based and news-content style articles were circulated which directly targeted the Conservatives or expressed support for the liberals. From what we've been hearing, these articles have been popping up in all sorts of groups (especially non-political ones).

However, when one of our supporters posted some of the pro-CPC articles, they were told their content was "too political" and were removed from the groups.

One example is an article that starts with "Crisis for Chinese Canadians, we need to save ourselves. Stop the conservative extremists from getting in power." Another is "The Liberals want your money, the Conservatives want your life", a third is "The Canadian version of "Trump"? The leader of the Conservative Party wants to block WeChat and vowed to fight China to the end." Attached you'll find additional examples of other articles that were posted and shared.

As you know, WeChat is the main messaging/social media platform used by the Chinese-speaking community in Canada and is directly controlled by Chinese corporations.

There were also anti-Conservative ads (without authorization tags) that were displayed on digital screens in a Chinese grocery store in Scarborough—Agincourt (attached).

It's our understanding that the Federal Liberals were not expected to do as well as they did with the Chinese community, and that they did not coordinate this campaign directly.

[Attachments]