



Summary Report

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Panel Theme: Diplomatic Perspectives on the Foreign Interference “Grey Zone”

The history of Canadian foreign policy since 1945 suggests two important points about foreign interference and diplomatic practice. First, it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between influence and interference, not just for conceptual but also for practical reasons. Second, foreign interference can sometimes serve liberal democratic purposes.

Authoritarian states pay little attention to the distinction between influence and interference when they plan their activities. They use whichever tools—legal or illegal, overt or covert—they believe will be most effective. At the beginning of the Cold War, the American diplomat George F. Kennan described this wide spectrum of action as “political warfare.” It included “the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”¹ For the leaders of the Soviet Union, he said, “no holds are barred. There are no rules of the game. They can do anything that they think is in their interests,” which means that “their choice is limited by only one thing, and that is their own estimate of the consequences to themselves.” For these reasons, we should understand foreign interference as just one component of a broader authoritarian strategy that aims to undermine liberal democracy.²

¹ Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” April 30, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945–1950: Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1996), doc. 269.

² George F. Kennan, *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946–47*, ed. Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1991) 8–9.

Political warfare stands at odds with many of the norms of international relations. It violates the 1945 UN Charter, the 1961 Vienna Convention, and the 1970 Declaration on Friendly Relations, all of which forbid intervention in the internal affairs of any sovereign state. Nevertheless, during the Cold War Canada and its allies interfered in the domestic affairs of communist states in order to promote liberal democratic interests and values. This track record suggests that, instead of trying to eliminate the grey zone, Canada could try to make the most of it.

Throughout the Cold War, the USSR and its partners attempted to undermine the political systems of their liberal democratic adversaries. Communist newspapers and broadcasters—including *Pravda*, Radio Moscow, and others—disseminated pro-Soviet versions of events and tried to bring Western audiences around to Moscow’s point of view.

In the grey zone, the Soviet Communist Party liaised with, advised, and sometimes funded Western Communist Parties. In some Western countries, including Canada, voters elected Party members to serve in their legislatures. The USSR supported Western NGOs that presented themselves as grassroots groups but usually followed Moscow’s line and tried to rally Western public opinion behind Soviet policies. It organized and financed public protests, conferences, and letter-writing campaigns to promote Soviet goals. Soviet and Eastern European intelligence agencies built espionage networks and launched disinformation campaigns, for example by spreading the false claim that the American government had invented HIV as part of its biological warfare program.³

The Canadian government tried to parry these challenges without curtailing the openness of its society. To be sure, Soviet efforts sometimes met with success. In 1945, for example, Igor

³ Douglas Selvage, “Operation ‘Denver’: The East German Ministry of State Security and the KGB’s AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1985–1986 (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21:4 (Fall 2019); and Douglas Selvage, “From Helsinki to ‘Mars’: Soviet-Bloc Active Measures and the Struggle over Détente in Europe, 1975–1983,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 23:4 (Fall 2021).

Gouzenko's defection revealed that Moscow had built espionage networks in Canada, the US, and Britain. Later, Canadian communists travelled to the USSR and consulted with senior Soviet officials. Canadian citizens read Soviet newspapers and listened to Soviet radio broadcasts. The USSR's efforts, both overt and covert, attempted to sway Canadian politics and compromise Canadian interests.⁴

Their impact was marginal. Canada's domestic institutions largely enjoyed popular legitimacy throughout the Cold War. Pro-Soviet arguments and propaganda failed to convince most Canadians, and the Communist Party of Canada remained on the political fringes. The country remained resilient in the face of political warfare.⁵

To advance the strategy of containment, Western governments also waged political warfare. They attacked the communist regimes' legitimacy and encouraged their critics in the hope of eroding Soviet power over the long term. They pressed Moscow to relax state censorship and allow citizens to travel abroad. Broadcasters such as the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Free Europe beamed uncensored news across the Iron Curtain. Western diplomats supported dissidents by both overt and covert means. They sheltered would-be defectors, including the Pentecostals who took refuge in the US embassy in Moscow in the late 1970s and the East Germans who crowded the West German embassy in Prague in 1989. The Soviets and their allies denounced these efforts as ideological subversion, which they certainly were. They also decried them as violations of their sovereignty, which was more debatable.⁶

⁴ Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945–1984* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007) 44–45; and Jennifer Anderson, *Propaganda and Persuasion: The Cold War and the Canadian-Soviet Friendship Society* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017).

⁵ See, for example, Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada since 1945: Politics, Power, and Provincialism*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) 116–117.

⁶ Mark G. Pomar, *Cold War Radio: The Russian Broadcasts of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac, 2022); Charles Ruud, *The Constant Diplomat: Robert Ford in Moscow* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press,

Occasionally, Western governments intervened—perhaps even interfered—in the domestic affairs of fellow liberal democracies. For decades, the CIA secretly funded centre-right political parties in Italy and Japan. Other efforts were more open.⁷ In 1967, from the balcony of Montreal’s Hôtel de Ville, French president Charles de Gaulle declared, “Vive le Québec libre!” Canadian prime minister Lester Pearson responded with indignation. “The people of Canada are free,” he said.⁸

The end of the Cold War did not stop Western political warfare. US president Barack Obama endorsed efforts to build an uncensored social media network for Cuba in the hope of fostering a dissident movement in the country. Stephen Harper’s government sponsored an online platform for critics of the Iranian theocracy. These efforts reflected the liberal democratic commitment to human rights, but they might also qualify as foreign interference.⁹

Some of Canadian diplomacy’s greatest achievements have gloried in the grey zone between influence and interference. In the 1980s, Allan Gotlieb, Ottawa’s ambassador to Washington, lobbied US Senators and members of Congress, especially on trade policy. Americans might have objected that Gotlieb was violating the Vienna Convention, which stipulates that “all official business...shall be conducted with or through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.” But there’s no denying that Gotlieb’s approach succeeded. He provided a blueprint that Canadian diplomacy continues to follow in dealing with Washington. During the Trump Administration, Ottawa launched a “full-court press” to save NAFTA, seeking to enlist

2009) 144–146; “16 Siberian Pentecostals End a Trip to Freedom,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1983; and Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 31–32.

⁷ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

⁸ Bothwell 255.

⁹ Taylor Owen, *Disruptive Power: The Crisis of the State in the Digital Age* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015) 149–150 and 163–164.

American politicians at the federal, state, and local levels as allies within the US political system.¹⁰

From time to time, Canadian leaders have invited Americans to get involved in Canadian domestic politics. During the 1995 Quebec referendum campaign, with encouragement from Jean Chrétien, US president Bill Clinton made public statements endorsing Canadian unity. During the 2019 and 2021 elections, the leaders of two federal parties sought and received the endorsement of leading American politicians. These examples may or may not count as foreign interference, but they do indicate that some Canadian leaders welcome foreign involvement in our politics when it serves their purposes.¹¹

If this history is any guide, foreign governments will continue trying to meddle in Canada's domestic affairs. The very openness of Canadian society makes it an easy target. Since states like Russia, China, and Iran are already violating longstanding norms prohibiting foreign interference, it's unlikely that they would respect the provisions of a new treaty on the subject. Besides, covert interference is just one component of their broader strategies to weaken liberal democracy. Countering these strategies therefore means responding to more than just the threat of interference.

The experience of the Cold War demonstrates that Canada can weather the challenge, so long as its domestic institutions remain resilient and command public confidence. To this end, the Canadian government must respond to the crisis of domestic legitimacy that has afflicted it and its allies for several years. The core tasks are to rebuild citizens' trust in our democratic

¹⁰ Allan Gotlieb, *The Washington Diaries, 1981–1989* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006); and Roland Paris, "A Full-Court Press with the US Is Our New Normal," *Globe and Mail*, July 16, 2017.

¹¹ James Blanchard, *Behind the Embassy Door: Canada, Clinton, and Quebec* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 197–219; Dan Bilefsky, "Obama Endorses Trudeau for Re-election Ahead of Canada Vote," *New York Times*, October 16, 2019; and Richie Assaly, "Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama — Notable Figures Share Their Endorsements as Canadians Head to the Polls," *Toronto Star*, September 17, 2021.

system and Constitution, strengthen national unity, shore up social cohesion, and reinvigorate public belief in the Canadian political project. A piece of legislation or a government program cannot singlehandedly solve problems of this magnitude. It will take a generational effort. The more progress Canada can make, the better equipped it will be to resist political warfare and make the case for liberal democracy.

The Canadian government should recognize that it can use the grey zone to its advantage too. From time to time, liberal democratic values and the national interest may require the country to push back against its adversaries through overt and covert means. But Canada cannot do this alone. It should work with its allies to craft a new strategy to respond to the rising danger of authoritarianism. As was the case with Cold War containment, this strategy may involve waging political warfare. The domestic and international challenges ahead are vast, but history illustrates how Canada can tackle them.