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# SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE THREATS TO ELECTIONS TASK FORCE

## After Action Report (2021 Federal Election)

December 17, 2021

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SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE THREATS TO ELECTIONS TASK FORCE

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**THREATS TO THE CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION 2021**

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**Executive Summary**

- (U//OUO) This report 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) in the 44th Canadian General Election (GE44).
- (U//OUO) Though not a focus of SITE TF, the issue of domestic threats and electoral security has been a key concern for the Security and Intelligence community for GE44. SITE TF committed to reporting significant threats linked to the election up to the Panel of 5 (P5) and the Election Security Coordination Committee (ESCC) for their awareness. As a result, this report includes reflections on electoral security.

**Summary of Key Observations - Foreign Threat Actors:**

- (TS//CEO) The People's Republic of China (PRC) sought to clandestinely and deceptively influence Canada's 2021 federal election. This FI was pragmatic in nature and focused primarily on supporting individuals viewed to be either 'pro-PRC' or 'neutral' on issues of interest to the PRC government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- (U//OUO) SITE TF also observed online/media activities aimed at discouraging Canadians, particularly of Chinese heritage, from supporting the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), party leader Erin O'Toole, and particularly former Steveston-Richmond East candidate Kenny Chiu GE44. While we do not have clear evidence that this online activity was a PRC-directed FI campaign, we have observed indicators of potential coordination between various Canada-based Chinese language news outlets as well as PRC and CCP news outlets.
- (TS///CEO) Indian officials were observed expressing interest in individual electoral contests.  
  
 Indian FI may have occurred in a covert manner and demonstrates Government of India's intent to influence the outcome of Canadian elections.
- (S//CEO) Other state actors (Russia,  Iran, Pakistan, ) were not observed engaging in activities threatening Canada's GE44. However, these states maintain a range of capabilities and engage in activities contrary to Canadian interests, requiring ongoing vigilance and monitoring.

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- (S//CEO) Over the course of the writ period, SITE TF saw no evidence to indicate that foreign state actors were specifically targeting Elections Canada (EC) or Canadian electoral systems and networks.

#### Summary of Key Observations - Elections Security:

- (PB) Following the announcement of GE44, there was a significant increase in the number of direct and indirect threats made towards Protected Persons, with the Prime Minister (PM) being the primary focus. These threats were persistent throughout the election period.
- (PB) Anti-COVID restriction grievances drove both online discussions and in-person protests throughout the campaign period. Violent rhetoric and behaviour escalated throughout August and September, and there were several public order incidents.
- (PB) A number of protests were either promoted by, or attended by, ideologically motivated linked individuals, including conspiracy theorists, anti-government and racially and ethno-nationalist motivated individuals.
- (PB) However, there is no intelligence to indicate that protests were formally organized by any ideologically motivated groups.

### Details

#### Scope and Sources

(U//OUO) This report 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) in the 44th Canadian General Election (GE44). It is based on analysis, reporting and observations – from both classified and unclassified sources – reviewed in the lead up to, and during, the writ period (16 August to 20 September 2021).

(U//OUO) This report does not aim to assess the impact of foreign threat actor activity on the outcome of the election.

#### SITE TF Members and Role

(U) SITE TF consists of members from the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The SITE TF's role is to help safeguard Canadian federal elections from FI by:

- Providing a clear point of engagement with the security and intelligence community for Government partners engaged in related work.
- Reviewing and focusing intelligence collection, assessment, and open-source analysis related to foreign interference in Canada's democratic process in a coordinated manner.

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- Providing situational awareness for Government partners, senior public servants, and other relevant partners.
- Promoting the use of intelligence, assessment, and open-source information analysis in the protection of electoral processes through sharing with partners or, when respective mandates permit, take action to mitigate the threat.

**Foreign Interference Defined**

(U) 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." In the context of Canadian electoral processes, the objective of FI is to affect electoral outcomes and/or undermine public confidence in Canadian democratic institutions. By contrast, foreign influence activity is overt and forms a part of routine global diplomatic engagement.

**Detailed Observations on Foreign Threat Actors**

**The People's Republic of China**

(TS//CEO) The People's Republic of China (PRC) sought to clandestinely and deceptively influence Canada's 2021 federal election. This FI was pragmatic in nature and focused primarily on supporting individuals viewed to be either 'pro-PRC' or 'neutral' on issues of interest to the PRC government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

(TS//CEO) The 2021 federal election appears to have been of significant interest to PRC threat-related actors. This interest was almost certainly due to a perception that one major political party, i.e., the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), was actively discussing PRC-related matters and promoting a platform that was perceived by PRC state actors as being contrary to their interests. Other bilateral issues at the time (e.g., the final stages of the Meng Wanzhou, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor cases) also almost certainly played a key role.

(TS//CEO) Prior to the election, PRC officials attempted to build relationships with individuals   perceived to be espousing or holding 'anti-PRC' views.  

(TS//CEO) In the months leading up to the election, it became clear that the CPC was not changing its official position on the PRC.   around this time, the PRC primarily preferred to support Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) candidates and oppose the CPC.   LPC minority was the preferred electoral outcome of the PRC   as the LPC was perceived to be 'friendlier' to the PRC and a minority government could ensure political infighting would inhibit Government of Canada policy responses to the PRC.

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(TS//CEO) The PRC mainly conducted FI via trusted third parties or 'proxies', i.e., entities acting on behalf of the PRC's interests. PRC government representatives were aware that they were not supposed to be involved in Canada's election, yet took steps to interfere regardless.

(TS//CEO) [redacted] network of trusted contacts both before and during the election

(TS//CEO) [redacted] proxies and threat actors acted in a manner that was entirely congruent with the PRC's interests, and supported individuals known to be 'favoured' by [redacted] and opposed to those viewed to be "anti-PRC". [redacted] [redacted] 'united front work', wherein threat actors often do not need direct tasking to act in the PRC government's interest.

**FI Example:** [redacted]

(TS//CEO) [redacted]

(TS//CEO) [redacted]

(TS//CEO) [redacted]

- (TS//CEO) [redacted]
- (TS//CEO) [redacted]

Continued...

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- (TS//CEO) [redacted]
- (TS//CEO) [redacted]

(TS//CEO) In addition to covert FI, certain entities also engaged in 'open' influence activities. [redacted] the CCP openly issued stark warnings via a propaganda media mechanism to Canadians during Election 2021. These warnings primarily sought to highlight negative consequences if Canadians voted for the CPC.

(U//OUO) Following a deep dive into Canada's Sinophone media ecosystem, SITE TF identified numerous articles posted and shared among PRC and Canada-based Chinese-language news websites and WeChat news accounts containing false claims about former CPC candidate for Steveston-Richmond East, Kenny Chiu, and his Private Members' Bill C-282 (An Act to establish the Foreign Influence Registry). The articles claimed that, if elected, Chiu would pass a "foreign power registry act" that would designate "any individual or group connected with China as a spokesperson of the Chinese government."

(U//OUO) The articles portrayed Chiu and Bill C-282 in a false or misleading way, and the narrative appeared embedded or alongside other news stories that claimed Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole "almost wanted to break diplomatic relations with China" with his GE44 platform.

(U//OUO) In some cases, SITE TF was able to track down web or WeChat news articles that made the specious claims; [redacted]

(S//CEO) [redacted] there is a common narrative in these articles, [redacted] the close timing and publication of similar content across several platforms is unusual [redacted] the material mirrors narratives publicly presented by the PRC government and the CCP. [redacted]

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(S//CEO) In some cases, FI threat actors (including the PRC) seek to utilize the 'grey zone' between appropriate, overt activities, and illegitimate and clandestine activity. The CCP's united front work, for example, is designed to take place in this legal and normative grey zone. It is difficult to decisively conclude whether certain individuals or entities are acting at the behest of the Party-state given shared interests between the PRC government, the CCP, and these entities. Individuals or groups of concern can have well-established relationships with the PRC's government and/or Party entities and proactively act in a manner that benefits PRC interests given an intimate knowledge of Party-state priorities and a general understanding of issues of concern. By proactively behaving in this manner, individuals or groups of concern invite 'benefits' and the favour of the PRC and CCP.

(TS//[ ]//CEO) PRC cyber actors remain highly active targeting a range of Canadian sectors including Education, IT Services, Health, Manufacturing and Federal Government. [ ]

[ ]

**India**

(S//CEO) Indian officials — [ ] — continue to conduct FI activities in Canada, both directly and through their Canadian proxies. During GE44 Indian officials were observed expressing interest in individual electoral contests and likely hoped pro-India candidates would prevail or, at least, that perceived anti-India candidates would not be (re-)elected.

(TS//CEO) Indian officials, proxies, and sympathizing politicians continue to support Indian interests in Canada. India's primary focus is not aimed at undermining Canadian interests per se, but rather at promoting India and countering threats to Indian stability. [ ]

[ ]

(TS//CEO) [ ]

(S//CEO) [ ]

[ ] it is in the interest of Indian officials to see candidates who prefer a pro-India agenda gain power in Canada.

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(S//CEO)

(U//OUO) In late 2020 and early 2021, SITE TF observed heightened interest in Canadian politics

Despite this earlier interest, SITE TF did not observe content related to Canadian politics from these media outlets throughout GE44.

*Post-Election Observations*

(TS///CEO)

**Russia**

(S//CEO)

Russia has typically focused FI activities on discrediting democratic institutions and processes, with an ultimate goal of destabilizing or delegitimizing democratic states. There are no indications that Russia prefers a particular Canadian political party or leader through which FI could be directed. The Kremlin likely assesses that major Canadian federal parties did not differ significantly in their stance toward Russia. In addition, Russia was clearly pre-occupied with its own elections which took place from 17 to 19 September.

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**Detailed Observations on Elections Security**

(U//OUO) While SITE TF is focused on FI, both the RCMP and CSIS, have mandates and authorities to look at domestic threats (within certain thresholds). The issue of domestic threats to politicians and election events has been a key concern since the Capitol Hill riots in the US on 6 January 2021. While this issue did not manifest in Canada in the same way as the US, there was nevertheless a notable increase in violent rhetoric, threats and incidents during the writ period. For GE44, SITE committed to reporting significant threats linked to the election up to the P5 and the broader ESCC community for their awareness (even if SITE TF was not the lead entity in responding to all threats).

(PB) Following the announcement of the federal election on 15 August 2021, there was a significant increase in the number of direct and indirect threats made towards Protected Persons, with the Prime Minister (PM) being the primary focus. These threats were persistent throughout the election period.

(PB) During the initial phase of campaigning, the Official Party leaders posted their detailed itineraries online. Once posted, multiple social media pages that were anti-Liberal, anti-Trudeau or anti-COVID restriction measures in nature would post the location of the PM. These sites existed prior to the announcement of the election, however, and generally shared anti-lockdown/anti-vaccine/anti-mask protest information and content expressing various grievances against the Liberal government.

(PB) Anti-COVID restriction grievances drove both online discussions and in-person protests throughout the campaign period. Violent rhetoric and behaviour escalated throughout August and September, which included a number of public order incidents occurring at various PM campaign stops in Ontario, at the All Party Leader's English language debate and at various hospital protests.

(PB) During the advance polling period, Elections Canada reported a number of conflicts at polling stations, the most common being voters refusing to wear masks. There were also two reported incidents of violence which resulted in law enforcement involvement.

(PB) A number of campaign events that were met by protest were either promoted by, or attended by, ideologically motivated linked individuals, with conspiracy theorists, anti-government and racially and ethno-nationalist motivated individuals being most prevalent. These events also attracted individuals that were not aligned with any specific ideology or entity, but who had experienced personal hardships due to the pandemic. Since April 2020, Canada has encountered weekly protests in multiple cities opposing COVID-19 public health measures. These protests, also attended and promoted by ideologically motivated individuals, have generally been peaceful in nature and have persisted in the post-election period.

(S//CEO) Notably, only one incident resulted in the denial of voters' access to a poll. The incident occurred on Six Nations' territory near Brantford, Ontario. In this case 20 protestors blocked access to the polling station and called for Elections Canada to remove the poll from the reserve. Six Nations Police

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responded but Elections Canada opted to move the poll before police could intervene. No protestors at this event were arrested or charged. As such, the only incident which resulted in voter interference/suppression was conducted by a group of activists that had no connection to the overwhelming majority of anti-vaccine/anti-COVID restriction protests, and which prior to election night were believed to pose the greatest threat to voter access to polls.

(PB) There has been no apparent formal organization for protests detected (for example, by IMVE groups) and the escalation in violent behaviour at public events started to dissipate before the election was over. There were no major threats reported during Election Day.

(PB) Since the outcome of the election, claims of election fraud/rigging have been observed on social media, but discussions opposing vaccine passports were more common than claims of election fraud.

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**LESSONS LEARNED/RECOMMENDATIONS**

**SITE TF Mandate:** (U//OUO) SITE TF's mandate is focused on FI threats to federal elections. During GE44, there was a new and significant appetite for information on domestic/IMVE threats and electoral security more generally. This necessitated some changes in reporting processes (principally within RCMP) and changed the nature of the regular briefings to the P5.

Recommendation: Given the current threat environment, determine if the issue of domestic threats/elections security should be formally included in the SITE TF mandate.

**Communications as a Tool to Counter FI:** (U//OUO) Communications is a critical lever in the GoC's toolkit for building resilience to and responding to foreign interference. GoC communications was a challenge in the lead up to, and throughout, GE44, in part due to the Caretaker Convention. For example, the GoC did not proactively communicate plans to safeguard the election as was done for GE43. As a result, academics, media and the leader of the Conservative Party – presumably unaware of the extensive measures in place – all criticized the GoC's lack of action to safeguard the election. Similarly, in the context of the Caretaker Convention, it was not entirely clear how incidents below the P5's threshold, but still worthy of public awareness, might be addressed.

Recommendation: Review the GoC's communications plan with a view to being more strategic about both proactive and reactive communications with respect to election security in order to maximize opportunities to raise public awareness and build resilience against FI threats.

**The Challenge of FI in a Complex Online Information Environment:** (S//CEO) RRM Canada monitoring reflected the pre-election threat assessment that any foreign state affiliated disinformation will likely



Recommendation: Ensure GAC's Rapid Response Mechanism Canada team, whose funding sunsets in March 2022, is provided with new and increased funding; continue to contract external partners from academia, civil society and industry to supplement SITE monitoring; and ensure government funding for academia and civil society to conduct independent monitoring and reporting on potential FI in this domain (e.g., through PCH's Digital Citizen Initiative) in order to further boost awareness and resilience.

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**Information Sharing/Roles and Responsibilities:** (S//CEO) The pervasiveness of domestic and foreign threats in the online information environment, and a growing demand for intelligence on this space, saw an increase in the number of entities engaged in online monitoring and a desire to share that information more broadly. During GE44, SITE TF held positive discussions with GC partners engaged in this activity, while the RCMP hosted an EC analyst within the RCMP's Combined Threat Intelligence Group for coordination purposes. In addition, RCMP instituted new process to enable broader sharing of threat related information. These activities represent key successes, as SITE TF was able to better integrate diffuse threat monitoring capabilities from across government.

Recommendation: Continue to solidify our understanding and management of this evolving space. Hold discussions/workshops with partners engaged in online/social media monitoring to clarify roles, responsibilities, capabilities and to improve communications, partnering and information sharing practices.

**Governance and Framework:** (S//CEO) The opportunity for SITE TF to meet with and brief the P5 in person was an improvement on the GE43 process, allowing SITE TF members to better understand P5 concerns and target reporting. SITE TF welcomes ongoing and regular feedback during the writ period to ensure that we are meeting expectations, addressing intelligence and knowledge gaps and fulfilling our mandate.

Recommendation: Continued SITE TF presence at P5 threat briefings, and regular check-ins at DM/ADM level for feedback/debriefs on P5 discussions.

**Political Party Engagement:** (S//CEO) Meetings with cleared political party members offered a unique opportunity to provide specific context to the threat environment, build a rapport with party representatives and open a two-way path for dialogue.

Recommendation: Review how the S&I community might engage with political party members outside of an election cycle to address ongoing issues of FI.