TSA CEO

SITE Task Force: Key Observations from GE44

Review of Principal Threat Actors and Elections Security

Update to the Panel

5 November 2021

Communications Security Establishment | Centre de la sécurité des télécommunications

Canada

TS// /CEO

Overview

CSE CSIS

GAC RCMP

Key Observations

- **Foreign Threat Actors**
- **Elections Security**

Key Lessons Learned

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Foreign Threat Actors - Summary

Key Observations

- (TS//CEO) The People's Republic of China (PRC) sought to clandestinely and deceptively influence Canada's 2021 federal election.
- (U//FOUO) SITE observed online/media activities aimed at discouraging Canadians from supporting the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC); however, we do not have clear evidence that this was a PRC-directed Foreign Interference (FI) campaign
- (TS/ //CEO) Indian officials
- (S//CEO) Other state actors (Russia, Iran, Pakistan, were not observed engaging in activities threatening Canada's GE44.
- (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.

TS/[redacted]/CEO

Elections Security - Summary

Key Observations

- (U//FOUO) SITE TF focuses on FI, but for GE44, SITE committed to reporting significant threats linked to the election up to the Panel and the broader ESCC community.
- (S//CEO) There was no intelligence indicating that IMVE posed a threat to Canada's elections.
- (PB) There was a significant increase in the number of direct and indirect threats made towards Protected Persons. 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, while violent rhetoric and behaviour escalated throughout August and September.
- (PB) A number of protests were either promoted by, or attended by, ideologically motivated linked individuals, but there is no intelligence to indicate that protests were formally organized by any main ideologically motivated groups.

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Foreign Threat Actors - PRC

(TS//CEO) The People's Republic of China (PRC) remains the most significant FI threat to Canadian interests. The sophistication and intensity of its FI activities, as well as the broad spectrum of its targets and FI methods, outpaces other hostile state actors.

Key Observations

- (TS//CEO) The PRC sought to clandestinely and deceptively influence Canada's 2021 federal election. This foreign interference (FI) was pragmatic in nature and focussed 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 PRC mainly conducted FI via trusted third parties or 'proxies', i.e., entities acting on behalf of the PRC's interests, in a manner consistent with the CCP's 'united front work' influence operations. PRC government representatives were aware that they were not supposed to be involved in Canada's election, yet took steps to interfere regardless.
- (U//FOUO) SITE observed online/media activities aimed at discouraging Canadians from supporting the Conservative Party of Canada. These activities appear to have taken place across multiple platforms and mediums including WeChat, Douyin, Chinese-language news sites, and reportedly radio.

TS/ CEO

Foreign Threat Actors - PRC

Key Observations - Continued

- (S//CEO) SITE does not have clear evidence that the media activity was a PRC-directed FI campaign, though we have observed indicators of potential coordination between various Canada-based Chinese language news outlets as well as PRC and CCP news outlets.
- (S//CEO) The activities observed are consistent with the CCP's united front work. The nature of 'united front' work encourages proxies and third-parties favorable to the PRC to conduct activities generally in China's interest. Domestic actors within Canada may have endeavored to further narratives damaging to the Conservative Party of Canada of their own accord without official direction or resources from PRC.
- (S//CEO) These activities highlight a grey area between FI and overt influence, and illustrates the challenges of identifying FI with certainty in the digital information environment.

TS/ /CEO

Foreign Threat Actors - India

(S//CEO) Indian officials

Key Observations

- (TS//CEO)
- (TS/ /CEO)

TS/ /CEO

Foreign Threat Actors – Other States

(S//CEO) Russia has the capability to engage in FI against Canada,

(S//CEO) Canada is lower priority for Iran;

(S//CEO) Pakistan has previously engaged in FI activities to promote its interests and counter Indian influence in Canada.

TS/[redacted]/CEO

Foreign Threat Actors – Other States

Key Observations

- (S//CEO) Other state actors (Russia, Iran, Pakistan, [redacted] were not observed engaging in activities threatening Canada's GE44.
- (S//CEO) These states still maintain significant capabilities and engage in activities contrary to Canadian interests, [redacted]
- (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.

TS/ /CEO

Elections Security

An Evolving Threat

- (U//FOUO) SITE TF focused on FI, but the issue of domestic threats to politicians and election events has been a key concern since the Capitol Hill riots.
- (S//CEO) In the lead up to GE44, there was no intelligence indicating that IMVE posed a threat to Canada's elections. However, there was an increased extreme narrative opposed to COVID-19 restrictions and a range of perceived grievances focused on Canadian politicians (at every level of governance) and other state representatives including law enforcement officials and judges.
- (U//FOUO) For GE44, SITE committed to reporting significant threats linked to the election up to the Panel and the broader ESCC community for their awareness.
- (PB) This necessitated a shift in processes/communications (principally for the RCMP)

TS/[redacted]/CEO

Elections Security

Key Observations

- (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, including a number of public order incidents
- (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
- (PB) There have been no main groups or apparent formal organization for protests detected 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.

TS/[redacted]/CEO

Key Lessons Learned

1. **Communications as a Tool to Counter FI:**
   - Communications are a critical component of the GoC's toolkit for building resilience, deterring, and responding to foreign interference.
   - GoC communications remain a challenge, in part due to the Caretaker Convention.
   - Without proactive communications ahead of GE44, there was a perceived lack of action on the part of the GoC, resulting in a lost opportunity to raise public awareness and build resilience.
   - Questions remain on how incidents below the Panel's threshold, but still worthy of public awareness, might be addressed.

2. **SITE TF Mandate:**
   - Current SITE TF mandate is focused on Foreign Interference threats to elections.
   - During GE 44, there was new appetite from the P5, PCO and other GoC stakeholders for information on domestic/IMVE threats.
   - This necessitated changes in process and communications structures (principally within RCMP) during GE44.
   - The GoC may wish to review the SITE TF mandate to determine if scope expansion is warranted.

TS/ /CEO

Key Lessons Learned

3. **Support for Civil Society and Academia:**
   - Online/media activities spreading false narratives and potential coordination between various Canada-based Chinese language news outlets as well as PRC and CCP news outlets highlighted the grey area between foreign interference and overt influence, and illustrates the challenges of identifying foreign interference with certainty in the digital information environment.
   - There was no GoC funding available to support academia and civil society to monitor for and report publicly on potential foreign interference in the information environment to further boost awareness and resilience.
   - Vehicles like PCH's Digital Citizen Initiative should be considered.