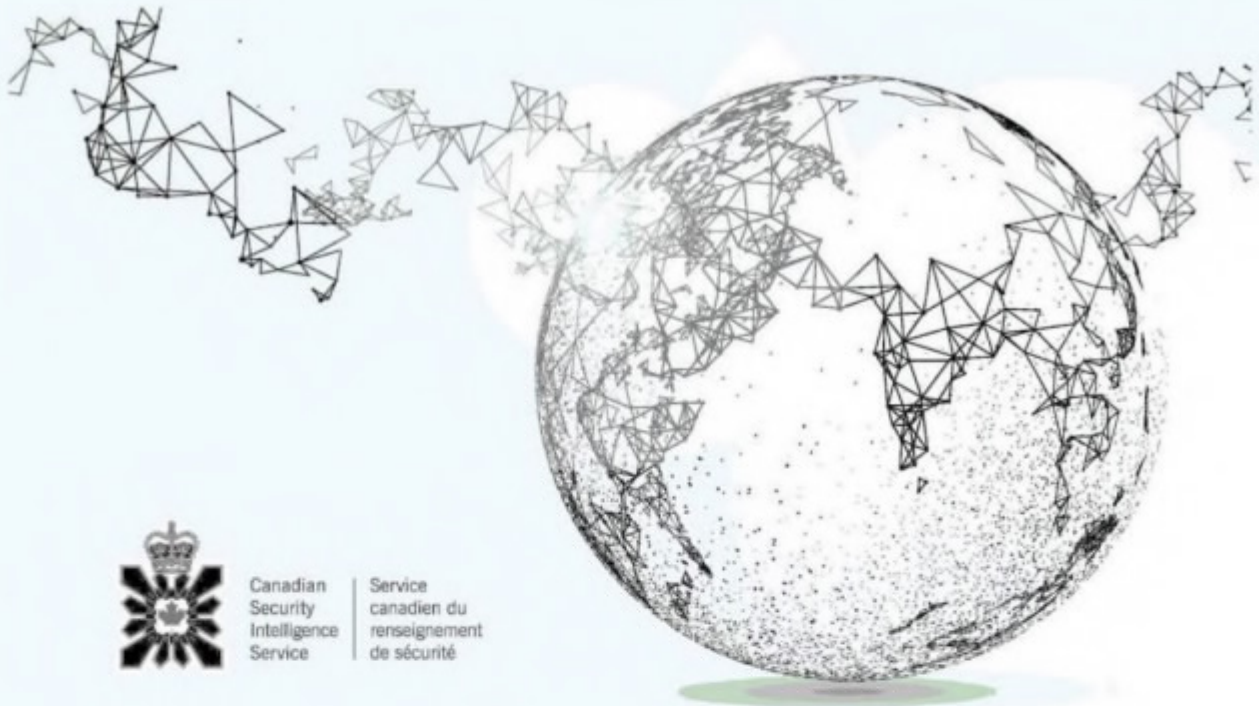


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INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

Foreign Interference and Elections: A National Security
Assessment



Intelligence Assessments Branch
Direction de l'évaluation du renseignement

Canada

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Foreign Interference and Elections: A National Security Assessment

Sophisticated, pervasive and persistent foreign interference (FI) activities constitute a serious threat to Canada's national security and the integrity of Canada's democratic institutions. Individuals and institutions at all levels of government as well as private sector organizations, civil society groups and Canadian communities continue to be actively targeted by these hostile activities. (S//CEO)

This assessment focusses on the threat posed by FI to elections in Canada—at the federal, provincial and municipal levels. It serves as a baseline for understanding and defining the FI threat, why and how Canada is targeted, and the impact of FI on Canadian elections. It includes the following sections in sequential order: 1) the threat; 2) the targeting; and, 3) the impact. (S//CEO)

While this assessment focusses primarily on FI activities during elections, these activities directed at Canada's democratic institutions and elected officials expand far beyond elections and election periods. For certain foreign states, including the People's Republic of China (PRC), FI activities are part of their normal pattern of behaviour and are active at all times. As a result, most of the examples referenced in this paper are associated with the PRC, even though other states also engage in FI activities. (S//CEO)

Key Assessments

- Foreign interference (FI) activities target all levels of government and various facets of Canadian society (e.g., diaspora groups, the general public, media entities). Since elections are integral to liberal democracies, FI activities often peak during election periods, as they represent a 'window of opportunity' and could play a decisive role in—or have a direct impact on—the final electoral outcome. (S//CEO)
- During elections, Hostile Activities by State Actors (HASA) employ FI to influence Canadian politics by i) clandestinely 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, HASA exploit loopholes in political party nomination processes; engage in money and financing operations; mobilize and leverage community organizations; and, manipulate media outlets. (S//CEO)
- Many elements of FI networks are deeply embedded in Canada's political and social fabric, in large part because Canada (like most Western states) have only recently awoken to the true nature and scope of the threat. Foreign states perceive Canada as a permissive operating environment where their activities are considered as low-risk, high-reward operations. Absent any legislative changes or other means of enforcement or threat mitigation, these activities are expected to continue. (S//CEO)



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The Threat

1. Foreign interference (FI) refers to activities "within or relating to Canada that are detrimental to the interests of Canada and are clandestine or deceptive or involve a threat to any person." (S//CEO)

- FI can be a single act or a series of activities or behaviours over a period of time;
- FI can involve both witting and unwitting individuals and organizations;
- FI obfuscates foreign state influence in policymaking; and
- FI occurs in a legal and normative 'grey zone,' undermining the rule of law, human rights and Canadian sovereignty. (S//CEO)

2. 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). In contrast, FI involves the use of clandestine, deceptive, or corruptive 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. (S//CEO)

- Diplomats from some states routinely engage in activities that cross the line from acceptable overt diplomatic engagement to covert malign interference. Furthermore, activities that are perceived by Canada as FI operations are part of the _____ spectrum of activities undertaken by diplomats from these countries, particularly those from the People's Republic of China (PRC). (S//CEO)

3. Hostile Activities by State Actors (HASA) target all levels of government—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. In particular, PRC FI threat 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. (S//CEO)

- Although the PRC may be the most active among state actors, it is by no means the only foreign country engaging in FI activities in Canada. India, Russia, _____ Pakistan, Iran and _____ are among those who actively engage in FI activities in Canada to advance their interests. These states may leverage a narrower range of tools and resources than the PRC, but their activities are nonetheless detrimental to Canada's interests. (S//CEO)

4. As elections are integral to the proper functioning of liberal democratic societies, election periods are crucial for FI activities. They represent a 'window of opportunity' for certain foreign states for which FI could influence or sway electoral outcomes. Foreign states like the PRC continue to develop important relationships in Canada year round in furtherance of their own political platforms, and will use these relationships to their advantage notably around election time, often through heightened FI activities. (S//CEO)



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Why is Canada a Target for FI?

5. Canada is a high-priority target for HASA for four 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)

- The Chinese Communist Party (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 a general 'deference' to the PRC's authority and interests. (S//CEO)

How is Canada targeted?

6. During elections, HASA employ FI and seek to influence Canadian politics by clandestinely supporting individuals perceived to be receptive to 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—through i) exploiting loopholes in political party nomination processes; ii) money and financing activities; iii) mobilizing/leveraging community organizations; and, iv) media manipulation (to include radio, Internet-based, and print media). (S//CEO)

- *Redacted text provides an example of how community organizations may be caught up in FI activity. As one example, intelligence reports indicate that PRC officials in Canada coordinated the exclusion of particular political candidates, perceived as 'anti-China', from attending local community events related to the election.*

- *Redacted text provides an example of a foreign state interfering in a municipal election.*

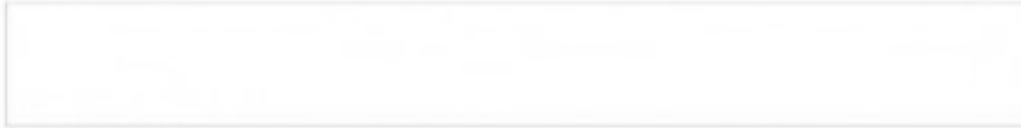




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Nomination Processes

7. Nomination processes for political parties in Canada are not directly regulated by federal or provincial government legislation or enforcement bodies (e.g., Elections Canada). 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. 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 the election period. HASA exploit this loophole to engage in FI that target specific candidates and particular electoral ridings. (S)

- *Redacted text provides an example of a foreign state interfering in matters related to the nomination process of a federal election candidate.*
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- *Redacted text describes intelligence reporting of PRC officials in Canada clandestinely supporting an elected official at the provincial level.*
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Redacted text summarizes intelligence reporting relating to in a nomination process preceding GE43. Buses were used to bring international students to the nomination process to support a particular candidate. Some intelligence reporting also indicated that the students were provided with falsified documents to allow them to vote. Intelligence reporting after the election also indicated that veiled threats were issued to the international students, implying their student visas could be in jeopardy if they did not support a particular candidate. Intelligence suggests the involvement of an individual who is a known proxy agent of PRC officials.

- [redacted] the Government of India (GoI) has engaged in FI activities related to the leadership race for a political party in Canada. (S//CEO)

- *Redacted text describes related intelligence.*

- [redacted]

This example serves to highlight the degree of influence some foreign states can have over diaspora communities, [redacted]

Money

8. HASA also channel monetary donations and other assistance to preferred candidates in elections, with the intent of fostering a bond of obligation 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 future favours and policy positions that are in the national interests of the foreign state—and 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 their next election. (S)

- *Redacted text summarizes examples of such behaviour.*





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[Redacted text block]

- *Redacted text summarizes examples of such behaviour.*

[Redacted text block]

- o [Redacted text block]

Community Networks

9. 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} [Redacted] on a regular basis. Key components of these FI networks usually include i) ^{PRC officials} [Redacted] 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)

- *Redacted text summarizes an example of such behaviour during GE44.*

[Redacted text block]

¹ 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) Uyghur independence activists; 3) Tibetan independence activists; 4) pro-Taiwan activists; and, 5) pro-democracy activists in the PRC (including Hong Kong).





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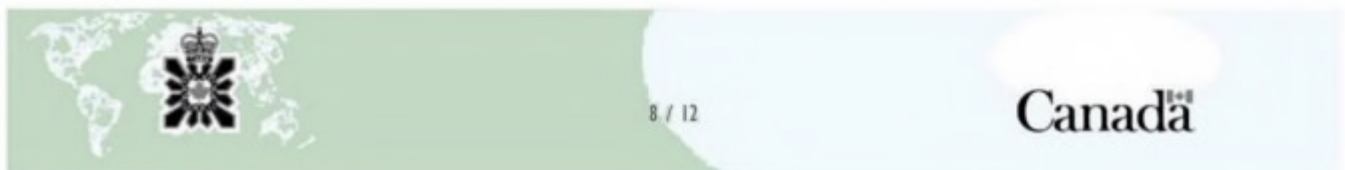
- *Redacted text summarizes an example of the use of community groups to support a candidate in a municipal election.*

Media

10. Traditional and online media outlets 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 foreign state FI activities that seek to manipulate and influence key media entities, control narratives, and disseminate disinformation. (S)

11. 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)

- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- WeChat is a Chinese-language social media platform that is widely used by the broader diaspora to maintain links back to family in China and to consume Chinese-language media and news. However, the platform is subject to the CCP's cyber regulations and is heavily censored. During GE44, disinformation activities targeting the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) and a CPC candidate were



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observed, with multiple Chinese-language media outlets amplifying this messaging, both via WeChat and their own websites. [redacted] cannot confirm direct PRC involvement in these disinformation activities, [redacted] there were indicators of coordination between PRC state entities and Chinese-language media outlets in Canada. These indicators are as follows. (S)

- *Timing*: even prior to the election, PRC state representatives had explicitly noted their perception that the CPC was going to run on an "anti-China" platform. [redacted] that, during the election, disinformation activities targeting the CPC ebbed and flowed in relation to the CPC's polling numbers. For example, as the CPC rose in the polls, disinformation activities targeting the CPC also increased. Conversely, as the CPC later dropped in the polls, disinformation activities targeting them also decreased. (S)
- *Language*: different Chinese-language media outlets used similar language and narratives in online activities targeting the CPC. [redacted] that specifically, the language and narrative from an article published by PRC state media were widely disseminated by these media outlets, but without attribution, as a means of attacking the CPC. This assessment is shared by open-source analysis. (S)
- *Organizational association*: most Chinese-language media outlets amplifying the online disinformation activities targeting the CPC are linked to the PRC via partnership agreements with the China News Service (CNS), the primary CCP media entity servicing the Chinese diaspora. CNS falls under the jurisdiction of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), which, as of March 2018, directly reported to the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD). The UFWD is the central coordinating body for CCP FI activities. (S)

The Impact

12. FI networks are active throughout Canada, and at all levels of government. Many elements of these networks are deeply embedded in Canada's political and social fabric—to include processes such as party nominations—in large part because Canada (like most Western states) has only recently become aware of the true nature and scope of the threat. The absence of specific legislation and enforcement capabilities exacerbates the pervasiveness of FI activity within Canada. (S//CEO)

- *FI threat actors may adjust their FI strategies over time to maximize their influence over democratic processes.*

13. Another insidious, hard to detect, and long-term impact of FI is the self-censorship on and internalization of specific narratives/messaging on the part of individual elected officials. Influence is the goal; FI is the method/tool to accomplish this goal. FI activities will be deemed successful once elected politicians begin to internalize narratives from certain foreign states. For example, official PRC messaging has long defined the "Five Poisons" as anti-China, and anyone who associates with the "Five Poisons" as



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being guilty—by association—of being anti-China. This messaging has been internalized by some elected Canadian officials who not only self-censor on issues related to the “Five Poisons”, but also repeat the PRC narrative. (S)

- *Redacted text describes examples of Canadian politicians at the provincial and municipal levels appearing to self-censor and/or espouse certain narratives relating to the “Five Poisons”.*

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14. Ultimately, FI harms Canada and Canadians by eroding sovereignty, democratic processes and values. The following is an illustrative list of examples. (S)

- Press freedom and the need for an informed citizenry are subverted by covert foreign state involvement with Canadian media outlets. As a result, especially during election periods, the media—particularly diaspora outlets—may not be an objective source of information, and certain narratives supportive of foreign state interests may clandestinely influence Canadian voters' decisions. (S)
- Individual liberties and the right to be free from harassment are undermined when certain foreign states and their proxies clandestinely control, influence, threaten or monitor Canadian diaspora communities. During elections, these communities may be excluded from fully participating in Canadian political life and exercising their democratic rights. (S)
- Democratic electoral processes are subverted when donations, campaign personnel, advice-giving, and get-out-the-vote efforts are covertly directed by—and done in the interests of—a foreign state. (S)



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Outlook

15. FI activities incrementally weaken the fabric of Canadian democracy, subtly diminish the hard-won social cohesion of a multicultural society, and impinge upon the Charter rights of Canadians. (S)

- Canadian elections at all levels of government will continue to provide an opportunity for certain foreign state actors to exercise influence, including interference in electoral and political processes, e.g., attempts to influence the outcomes of specific electoral contests or pressuring politicians to take pro-foreign state positions. Such positions could mean supporting or opposing motions or legislation in Canadian parliament, and building the pro-foreign state narratives within all levels of government in Canada, in an effort to get Canada geo-strategically on side with the foreign state's global interests. (S)

16. CSIS is undertaking active efforts to address the challenge of FI. Specifically, CSIS conducts FI defensive briefings and outreach to all levels of government. However, these engagements are hindered by an inability to share information at more classified levels. CSIS will also continue to publish and disseminate analytical products on FI in Canada to clients throughout the Government of Canada ecosystem, as a means of increasing awareness on FI activities and the actors behind these activities. (S)

17. There are limitations to these approaches, as there are no real consequences to HASA employing FI. Absent real disincentives (e.g., a "foreign agent" registry, criminal indictments for those engaged in FI activities, etc.), HASA employing FI to target Canada and Canadians is expected to continue—even increase—in the future. (S)

- Certain foreign states almost certainly perceive their FI activities in Canada to be low-risk and high-reward, and will continue to target fundamental facets of Canada's open society and democracy to achieve certain outcomes. (S)
- Certain foreign states will continue to manipulate, misuse and coopt Canadian institutions to further their interests and use Canadian voices to launder foreign state narratives. (S)

18. To build resilience, Canadian communities and all levels of government in Canada need to be aware of FI activities, via a "sunlight" policy that exposes such behaviour. (S)

- Political parties in Canada at all levels of government also have a role to play in building their own resilience against HASA employing FI. (S)



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