



Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Election Protocol Panel New Communications Retreat

Monday, August 23, 2021, 14:30 - 16:00, via CTSN

Objectives

- Receive a threat update from SITE, discuss the Panel announcement process, and review scenarios with other members of the Election Protocol Panel (Panel) for General Election 44 (GE44).

Run of Show

- This meeting will convene members of the Panel to continue the scenario-based exercise for GE44 commenced at the July 26 Panel retreat. Agenda will include: (1) Introductory remarks; (2) Threat update: SITE and CSIS; (3) Retreat scenario exercise: lessons learned; (4) Scenario exercise; (5) Discussion of Panel announcement process; and (6) Wrap-up.
- Participants will include: Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet; François Daigle, newly appointed Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General of Canada and Rob Stewart, Deputy Minister of Public Safety. Mike MacDonald, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet from the Office of the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister, will stand in for Vincent Rigby.
- Chief of CSE, Shelly Bruce, and Director of CSIS, David Vigneault, will deliver threat briefings for their respective agencies. IOL/Dobner will deliver GAC's threat brief on foreign interference in the online information ecosystem including observations both post-writ and pre-writ since January.
- **Departmental Representative:** IOL/Dobner

Key Messages

- The most difficult scenarios are likely to involve disinformation, where it is difficult to determine whether the source is foreign or domestic, or where the two intersect.
- Global Affairs Canada has a specific role to play via the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada team, in terms of providing situational awareness to decision-makers, including the Panel, on foreign state sponsored disinformation online. This is gleaned from open source data analysis.
- Global Affairs Canada's RRM Canada team can also leverage its international partnerships to corroborate findings and exert diplomatic pressure, potentially through the G7.
- More broadly, Global Affairs Canada has a critical role to play in terms of response options where foreign states are implicated.
- It is important to recall that attribution to foreign state actors, especially in the short time timeframe of an election period, is difficult if not impossible.
- Likewise, determining the impact of a disinformation operation on the integrity of an election is extremely difficult.

Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This meeting follows a July 26 Panel retreat during which members reviewed scenarios in preparation for GE44 and received a debrief of the political party briefing organized by PCO in July.
- **Threat Update: SITE and CSIS:** The Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE) Chair will deliver a consolidated briefing to include both the foreign and domestic picture. Shelly Bruce, Chief of CSE, and David Vigneault, Director of CSIS, will deliver threat briefings for their respective agencies. IOL/Dobner will deliver GAC's threat brief on foreign interference in the online information ecosystem including observations both post-writ and pre-writ since January. RRM

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Canada will also provide a quick overview of its methods for context. We understand that RRM Canada, per your request, will speak to its work in greater detail at a future Panel meeting.

- RRM Canada has shifted its reporting rhythm from monthly to daily reports to support SITE's operational pace during the writ period.
- In its last monthly report from July, RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem. This has been the case for the entire pre-election monitoring period, which started in December 2020. Notwithstanding, Canada has been the target of various online campaigns elsewhere conducted by various advocacy campaigns led by foreign non-state actors. Analysis of two such campaigns (the Indian students and Ethiopian diaspora activists) demonstrated that actors – even with limited resources – can impact the Canadian online information space.
- The digital information ecosystem remains one of the most unpredictable vectors of potential foreign interference, due to its open and accessible nature.
- Topics of note for possible exploitation around GE44 include Canada's record on human rights and indigenous relations, as foreign actors may exploit related narratives in information campaigns aimed at deflecting criticisms of their own human rights records.
- Information operations targeting US politics, combined with US domestic advocacy campaigns, may also impact the Canadian information environment due to geographic proximity and cultural-linguistic overlap between Canada and the US.
- **Scenario Exercise:** PCO's Democratic Institutions will be presenting another scenario which is not yet available. The scenarios are designed to elicit discussion on: 1) developing a common understanding of the thresholds; 2) the mandate of the Panel and other players; and 3) considerations around making an announcement if threshold is met.
- The scenario will likely cover different instances of possible threats to the integrity of GE44, both foreign and domestic or a combination of both. These instances could be a result of human intelligence operations, cyber threats or online disinformation campaigns, targeting the elections process itself, parties and politicians or the public. The scenario will almost certainly relate to the current COVID context and public health.
- **Discussion of Panel Announcement Process:** There will be a discussion on the process of alerting the Prime Minister, Elections Committee and the political parties of an impending announcement as per the requirements of the Protocol.
- **Thresholds and Public Communications:** The Panel's threshold for communicating with the public about threats to federal elections is very high, particularly during a writ period as the Caretaker Convention restricts the government's public communications. PCO is leading a communications framework which should address incidents that fall below the Panel's threshold but where communication is in the public interest. It is important to note that that both media and a growing community of researchers will likewise be reporting publicly on possible threats. The Department's Communications branch is participating in both PCO's Director General communications table and SITE's working level communications table.
- RRM Canada has developed an Alert Scale to serve as a comparative framework to determine the level of concern to accord a particular suspected foreign interference information operations (IO) during a specific period of assessment (attached). The scale comprises a number of characteristics and a combination thereof helps analysts to determine a low, medium or high level of concern. This can assist the Panel in determining a breach of integrity and the communications table in considering the seriousness of an incident.

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Author's name/division/tel.:

Consulted divisions/departments: PCO, CSE

Approving ADM: IFM

Name and symbol of departmental officer attending/tel.:

Attachments:

- RRM Canada Alert Scale

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