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Meeting of the Election Protocol Panel of Five

January 27, 2021, 16:00-17:30 (secure mobile)

Objectives

- Develop shared understanding of evolving threat picture.
- Discuss NSICOP recommendations, including how Panel will tackle twin challenges of attributing threats and determining their impact, when deciding whether an incident is critical and should be reported to Canadians.
- Underline importance of clear GoC lines of responsibility and a coordinated and targeted communications strategy to be employed throughout the writ period.
- Insist that GAC's Rapid Response Mechanism be included in PCO Protecting Democracy 2.0 MC.

Run of Show

- There is no confirmed agenda for this Panel meeting at time of writing. We understand from PCO contacts that the following may be discussed: (1) current environment and impact on the Panel; (2) upcoming NSICOP appearance; (3) threat environment and SITE readiness presented by CSIS and CSE heads; (4) update on Elections Security Coordinating Committee and recent table top exercise; and (5) support to the Panel. Invited participants include: R. Stewart, N. Drouin, V. Rigby, I. McCowan, A. Sutherland, D. Vigneault, and S. Bruce.

Key Messages

Current Environment and Impact on Panel

- It's clear current global threat environment is different from fall 2019.
- COVID has created an infodemic, where information environment is flooded with information, some accurate and some not, as users engage online like never before.
- US election had laid bare fragility of democracy; highlighted risks of social polarization and rise of ideologically motivated violent extremism; and exemplified power of unchecked social media platforms – mainstream and alternative – both to amplify and silence voices.
- Environment has created new opportunities for adversaries with possible implications for elections interference.
- Critical we learn lessons from GE43; but equally critical we plan for GE44 looking ahead and rather than through our rearview mirrors.

Upcoming NSICOP Appearance

- Welcome NSICOP response to Judd report; NSICOP recommendations worthy of discussion.
- Strongly support final recommendation: need to continue to carefully consider how panel will determine if an incident or accumulation of incidents impairs Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election – this is crucial.
- As discussed at our last meeting, there are two major challenges: attribution and impact.
- Almost impossible to attribute covert disinformation campaigns to foreign state actors anymore, as our adversaries have sought to blur the lines between domestic and foreign (e.g., amplifying domestic narratives and proxies); our analysts can sometimes detect indicators of foreignness but they can rarely attribute to a foreign state.
- Also almost impossible to evaluate impact. Cannot determine reach of disinformation campaign with confidence let alone the impact it has on voting intentions.
- Neither can be done in the space of a writ period – this analysis takes time and disinfo campaigns are often launched near the end of a campaign, closer to the actual vote.

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- These were challenges for the P5 the last time around and they will continue to be challenges for the P5 this time around.

Threat Environment and SITE Readiness

- See above for TPs on threat environment.
- Appreciate SITE readiness is trickier this time around, without a fixed election date.
- GAC, on behalf of SITE, is organising three-part workshop for GoC officials engaged in elections security, to include: (1) lessons learned from GE43; (2) lessons learned from recent 5 Eyes elections; and (3) evolution of cyber and digital threats in elections. GAC will prepare a summary, highlighting key take-aways for this Panel.

Update on Elections Security Coordinating Committee

- Pleased to see ADM and DG ESCCs have been convening regularly.
- Critical that ADM and DG ESCCs agree to a coordinated and targeted communications strategy. GoC must be in a position, throughout the writ period, to address questions about the integrity of the process in a clear and transparent fashion that responds to concerns and instills confidence in the process we have stood up. If we do not fill the information space, others – including our foreign adversaries – will. Communications is key to building societal awareness and resilience. It cannot be an afterthought.

Support to the Panel

- Will need to once again undertake tabletop exercises.
- Suggest that SITE be charged with formulating the scenarios, given they have the best grasp of what the challenges might be this time around – again, it's important that we prepare for the threats we may face in GE44 and not what we prepared for in GE43.

Protecting Democracy 2.0

- Last time we discussed PCO Democratic Institutions Protecting Democracy 2.0 deck.
- Understand PCO DI is now advancing an MC.
- Global Affairs will want to use this opportunity to seek cabinet blessing and funding for the department's Rapid Response Mechanism, which leads the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and works with other international partners to identify and respond to foreign state sponsored disinformation targeting Canada and other democracies. Current funding and authorities sunset in March 2022.

Context

Previous Interactions:

- The Panel last met on Oct 14, 2020. The meeting was billed as an informal conversation to: (1) reconnect Panel members; (2) provide the National Security Advisor an opportunity to brief on the current threat picture should a federal election be called; and (3) discuss the PCO Democratic Institutions-led process to help protect Canada's democracy.

Key Issues:

- **Current Environment and Impact on Panel:** This agenda item is meant to be a discussion of changes in the environment since 2019, including the US Election, mis/disinformation, and COVID. The Panel engage on these issues in October, but this is an opportunity to discuss the impact of the US election in particular.

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- Following the January 6 Capitol Hill attack, mainstream social media platforms began to de-platform, suspend or ban former US President Trump and some of his supporters, including a number of extremist voices. US and likely other western based cyber infrastructure providers such as Amazon also began to deny or terminate service provision for alternative social media platforms hosting these extremist voices. These developments could result in a convergence of threat vectors, with these extremist voices finding refuge on the same alternative social media platforms, where politically, ideologically and religiously motivated violent extremists have already established themselves, ripe for amplification by hostile foreign actors. These developments could also result in a new market to host these de-platformed voices that could be serviced by hostile foreign actors seeking to sew further division and violent unrest. Given the transnational nature of these alternative platforms, including the presence of Canadian voices, there may be spill-over effects in Canada with implications for GE44.
- **Upcoming NSICOP Appearance:** This agenda item is meant to address the NSICOP response, including recommendations, to the Judd report, as well as key messages (presumably for an upcoming NSICOP appearance about which we could not garner further information).
- In its response to the Judd Report, the NSICOP supported two recommendations in particular: (1) re-establishing the protocol on a permanent basis; and (2) extending the Protocol to include the pre-writ period. NSICOP also raised the possibility of extending the protocol to cover federal and provincial referenda.
- The NSICOP also offered four of its own recommendations: (1) Protocol and Panel should not focus on cyber threats at the expense of traditional threats; (2) should reconsider membership of Panel including possibility of eminent Canadian instead of busy senior public servants; (3) Panel should have direct link to political parties, i.e., inform political parties ahead of making any public announcement; and (4) Panel should consider carefully how it would make determination to inform Canadian of serious incident and if it makes sense to attribute to a foreign actor, keeping in mind possibility of aggravating partisan divisions.
- **Threat Environment and SITE Readiness:** CSIS/Vigneault and CSE/Bruce will provide an updated threat assessment and speak to SITE readiness. On behalf of SITE, GAC is leading a series of workshops to prepare GoC officials.
- **Update on Elections Security Coordinating Committee:** Elections Canada and PCO S&I have been convening ADM and DG ESCC meetings on a monthly basis since August 2020, to establish a work plan, update the 2019 incident response playbook and conduct a joint tabletop exercise.
- The tabletop exercise demonstrated the need to better inform GoC officials of the nature of the threats (scenario involved spread of disinfo by a foreign state that assumed ability to identify source within 24 hours). It also demonstrated the need to develop clear roles and responsibilities (between departments and between interdepartmental tables, e.g., DM/ADM/DG ESCC versus DM/ADM NS Ops) so it is clear who is calling the play if the integrity of GE44 is under threat. And it pointed to the need for a more considered and coherent approach to communications, which will likely constitute the bulk of any response.
- **Support to the Panel:** This agenda item may cover meeting frequency, development of TTX scenarios, and additional intelligence support and requirements. You may wish to recommend that SITE has a role laying out scenarios for Panel discussion that closely reflect the most likely threats.
- s. 39 - Cabinet Confidence

Author's name/division/tel.: Gallit Dobner/IOL

Consulted divisions/departments: Nil

Approving ADM: IFM

Name and symbol of departmental officer attending/tel.: NA

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