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Indo-Pacific Strategy: Rapid Response Mechanism Canada Request

Issue

Foreign threats to democracy, including state sponsored disinformation have grown in 2021. The Indo-Pacific region has been both victim and source of disinformation, with China among the leading threat actors in its geographical scope. This upward trend, combined with the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific, has resulted in a higher volume of demands on GAC's Rapid Response Mechanism Canada (RRM Canada) team in leading the G7 RRM, spearheading Canada's policy on state sponsored disinformation, and identifying disinformation threats to Canada and G7 partners, including in the context of Canadian elections.

Considerations

Foreign threats to democracy, including state sponsored disinformation, have grown in 2021, in the context of rising geopolitical tensions, the global pandemic and the rapid development of enabling technology. The Indo Pacific region's stability and prosperity are affected by disinformation. But the region is also an important source of disinformation, including disinformation targeted at Canada and Canadians. China, along with Russian and Iran, are among the main culprits leveraging disinformation to achieve their national and geopolitical objectives. In its 2021 Freedom in the World report, Freedom House underlined the growing malign influence of China's regime. It explained how Beijing is ramping up its global disinformation campaign, its meddling in the domestic political discourse of foreign democracies, and its transnational rights abuses. As the war in Ukraine demonstrates, disinformation is ubiquitous and particularly harmful in crisis situations. Should a geopolitical crisis flare up in the Indo-Pacific region, RRM Canada would be ill-prepared to handle the accompanying disinformation fall-out with its current staffing levels and resources.

We are seeing malign influence emanating from China, and other Indo-Pacific countries such as India, manifesting in Canada. For example, we have seen attempts by the Chinese state to influence Canadians leading to our last general election (GE44). We have also tracked how the Chinese state spun false narratives about the two Michaels, the detention of Meng Wanzhou, and the efficacy and safety of Canadian COVID 19 vaccines. Leading to GE44, we have seen India manipulating the information environment in Canada on the subject of the Indian farmers' protests. Both India and China engaged in disinformation about the convoy blockades in Ottawa. In the context of the Ukraine crisis Chinese state affiliated media entities and platforms have been supporting the amplification of dangerous narratives about "U.S. biolabs in Ukraine" and the "need for denazification" of Ukraine spearheaded by Russian state-controlled entities. Finally, Canadians who hail from the Indo-Pacific region – including China and India, but also the Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia – are increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns and harassment from entities abroad. Many of these campaigns are state-led operations and are intended to silence critics or human rights defenders from the Indo-Pacific region who live in Canada.

Increased demands to identify disinformation threats to Canada and G7 partners. RRM Canada includes a small team of open source data analysts, who have the unique capacity to monitor the digital information ecosystem in real-time to identify and report on signs of foreign state-sponsored disinformation related to Government of Canada priorities. Recent reports include likely Beijing campaigns targeting the two Michaels, new German Foreign Minister Baerbock, and COVID in the context of Omicron and the 2022 Olympic Games. This also includes representing GAC on the [Security](#)

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[and Intelligence Threats to Elections \(SITE\) Task Force](#), which promotes coordination to prevent foreign interference in Canada's federal elections, and the complementary interdepartmental Elections Security Coordinating Committee (ESCC).

This work has become increasingly difficult over the past two years, as the digital information space has grown increasingly complex and hostile actors have gotten increasingly savvy. Hostile actors now operate within an ecosystem of disinformation, from state actors and proxies to unwitting bystanders. They are no longer creating content and using bots to amplify it; instead, they are amplifying domestic content, often using proxies to muddy the distinction between free speech and foreign interference. They now manipulate a multiplicity of platforms – not just social media – including websites. The space is fragmenting, with new platforms emerging. It is growing less open, with users privileging encrypted channels. And it is easier to manipulate, with technical barriers to entry falling. At the same time, access to structured data is increasingly limited, and the training of analysts and development of privacy-respecting in-house tools and methods is time-consuming and costly.

Furthermore, monitoring disinformation coming from China or through Chinese-owned channels is particularly labour intensive. Monitoring must be performed manually due to a) lack of transparency on the part of social media companies owned by China and b) complete lack of commercial “off-the-shelf” monitoring tools for platforms like WeChat, Weibo and TikTok. Finally, China and India are also linguistically diverse countries and require data analysts with knowledge of Asian languages spoken by diaspora communities. Canada is a country of many language solitudes, with robust media ecosystems that are largely separate from Canada's French and English language media spheres.

A proven asset. The RRM Canada team has proven itself an asset to both the Government of Canada and G7 partners since it was established as a pilot initiative in 2019. Canadian senior officials as well as G7 RRM member and observer countries have consistently recognised the team for the invaluable role it plays in identifying foreign threats to democracy and promoting international collaboration. In this context, the Prime Minister announced ongoing funding for RRM Canada in March 2022, effectively transitioning the pilot into an ongoing programme. However, in order to understand the impact of disinformation on the stability and prosperity of the Indo Pacific region, and to adequately assess the threat disinformation emanating from the region poses for Canada and Canadians, RRM Canada requires additional funding.

RRM Canada Ask

Objectives:

- 1) To increase Government of Canada capacity to monitor the online environment for disinformation targeting democracies in the Indo-Pacific, in order to support their response..
- 2) To increase Government of Canada capacity to monitor the online environment for disinformation emanating from the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada and Canadians, including during election cycles, as well as other democracies.
- 3) To effectively collaborate with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific region, including Australia, New Zealand and Japan (all members of the G7 RRM) to counter disinformation.
- 4) To strengthen Canada's leadership to counter disinformation through the G7 RRM and other international forums, such as and the Freedom Online Coalition.

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Human Resources

Option 1 – OPTIMAL PLUS

8 FTEs

- 1 EC7 - DD
- 3 EC6 (Data) – 2 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific and 1 focussed on disinformation originating in the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada, including during election cycles
- 3 EC5 (Data) – 2 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific and 1 focussed on disinformation originating in the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada, including during election cycles
- 1 EC 5 (Policy - RRM Canada)

Ops budget to support of \$700K annually:

- Short time deployments to the region (month to 3 months) – to ensure high level of contextual knowledge; effectiveness/impact of efforts; and collaboration
- Ad hoc travel – conferences, exchanges, seminars, training opportunities
- Tools and Access to Data – to be able to collect and analyse open data
- Training – to keep up with the newest trends
- Small contracting – to enhance collaboration with partners, including partners in the region

Option 2 - RECOMMENDED

6 FTEs

- 1 EC7 - DD
- 2 EC6 (Data) – 1 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific and 1 focussed on disinformation originating in the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada, including during election cycles
- 2 EC5 (Data) – 1 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific and 1 focussed on disinformation originating in the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada, including during election cycles
- 1 EC 5 (Policy RRM Canada)

Ops budget to support of \$500K annually:

- Short time deployments to the region (month to 3 months) – to ensure high level of contextual knowledge; effectiveness/impact of efforts; and collaboration
- Ad hoc travel – conferences, exchanges, seminars, training opportunities
- Tools and Access to Data – to be able to collect and analyse open data
- Training – to keep up with the newest trends
- Small contracting – to enhance collaboration with partners, including partners in the region

Option 3 – MINIMALIST

4 FTEs

- 1 EC6 (Data) – 1 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific

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- 2 EC5 (Data) – 1 focussed on the impact of disinformation on peace/security/democracy in the Indo-Pacific and 1 focussed on disinformation originating in the Indo-Pacific region targeting Canada, including during election cycles
- 1 EC 6 (Policy RRM Canada)

Ops budget to support of \$300K annually:

- Short time deployments to the region (month to 3 months) – to ensure high level of contextual knowledge; effectiveness/impact of efforts; and collaboration
- Ad hoc travel – conferences, exchanges, seminars, training opportunities
- Tools and Access to Data – to be able to collect and analyse open data
- Training – to keep up with the newest trends
- Small contracting – to enhance collaboration with partners, including partners in the region

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