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USS DMs' Elections Security Coordinating Committee Meeting

Thursday, March 16, 2021, 14-15:30, A3, CTSN VTC [REDACTED]

Objectives

- Underline GAC/Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) efforts in preparing for General Election 44 (GE44).
- Stress the importance of developing communications protocols and a communications strategy should the need arise to address foreign interference publicly.
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Run of Show

- Deputy Ministers' Elections Security Coordinating Committee (DM ESCC) is chaired by Elections Canada and PCO; other DMs in attendance include: Commissioner of Canada Elections, CSE, CSIS, GAC, NRCAN, PHAC, PSC, RCMP.
- All participants will meet via secure call.
- **Departmental Representative:** Gallit Dobner, IOL Director, can accompany if required.

Key Messages

Preparing for GE 44

- Important that we benefit from lessons learned from GE43, and recent likeminded national elections, as we prepare for GE44. Recognizing this, GAC/RRM, on behalf of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE), has organized a series of four workshops to help prepare GoC officials to counter possible foreign threats during GE44.
 - On Feb 4th, FVEY partners briefed on lessons learned from their recent elections;
 - On Feb 11th, the SITE Chair, Jim Judd and two outside experts spoke to lessons learned from GE43;
 - On Feb 19th, a workshop was held focusing on new and emerging tactics and trend in online disinfo;
 - Given the positive feedback received, a fourth workshop is currently being planned with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on March 23rd to discuss their report: *Cyber-enabled Foreign Interference in Elections and Referendums*. GAC/RRM is preparing key takeaways that will be shared with DG, ADM and DM ESCCs.

GAC Monitoring and Reporting

- GAC/RRM is preparing monthly reports leading up to GE44, which are being shared with the DG and ADM level ESCCs. These reports are designed to establish a baseline of online behaviour in the Canadian digital information ecosystem to facilitate the identification of anomalies linked to potential foreign interference as the election nears.
- GAC/RRM is producing additional ad hoc reporting, including our recent report summarizing foreign information manipulation in the 2020 US elections with a view to building greater awareness of the kinds of threats that the GoC may face in GE44.
- GAC/RRM is working with data scientists at CSE to help develop new tools to monitor and detect coordinated disinformation campaigns online and support reporting regarding online trends leading up to GE44.

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Roles, Responsibilities & Comms Protocol

- The December ADM/DG ESCC tabletop exercise and experience during GE43 pointed to communications as an area for improvement.
- More work is required to clarify roles and responsibilities when faced with a possible critical incident, as well as a comprehensive communications strategy to respond.
- We need to keep in mind that when it comes to online spaces, disinformation spreads incredibly quickly, while attribution is time-consuming and determinations of responsibility with high confidence often cannot be made.

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Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This is the second meeting of the DM ESCC in preparation for GE44.
- **GE44 Readiness:** 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 objective of March 1, 2021 readiness has largely been achieved to a similar level as that of GE43. Work continues in multiple areas and GAC has participated actively, including in the ADM/DG ESCC tabletop exercise in December and the workshops we have been coordinating throughout 2021.
- It is important to note that the scope of the ESCC's work is broader than foreign interference, which is the focus of GAC's RRM. Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE) often dominates DG and ADM ESCC discussions; however, this is not the focus of the RRM's research and reporting.
- In 2019, GAC's RRM team organized training for GoC officials ahead of the elections. This year, in coordination with SITE, the RRM organized a three-part training exercise that included: (1) lessons learned from GE43; (2) lessons learned from recent FVEY elections; and (3) Best Practices in Detecting and Analyzing Foreign State Online Manipulation. Given the positive feedback received from across the GoC and the reduced chance of snap elections, GAC is coordinating a fourth workshop on cyber enabled foreign interference with experts from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and moderated by a representative from the Canadian Cyber Center on March 23rd.
- **Roles, Responsibilities & Comms Protocol:** The ADM/DG ESCC table top exercise showed that more work is required to clarify roles and responsibilities when faced with a possible critical incident, as well as a comprehensive communications strategy.
- Moving forward, work must begin to determine how to engage the media ahead of the election, with respect to foreign state sponsored disinformation. Media are often a determining factor in terms of whether mis/disinformation is mainstreamed, e.g., they sometimes unwittingly amplify mis/disinformation by reporting on it.
- GAC has suggested investigating the possibility of including experts in press briefings – such as those who participated in our recent workshop – to help better prepare the press for the next election.
- **P5:** You may recall that the NSIA convened the P5 on March 8th in preparation for his appearance before the NSICOP. You attended alongside DMs Rob Stewart and Nathalie Drouin. Topics discussed included the current threat landscape along with the NSICOP recommendations following the James Judd report on GE43. These recommendations included establishing the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol (the Protocol) on a permanent basis and to cover federal and provincial referenda. Assessing impact of disinformation on voter behaviour and attributing

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covert disinformation campaigns to foreign actors remain key challenges for the P5 in ensuring elections integrity.

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- **SITE:** SITE was established to prevent covert, clandestine or criminal activities from influencing or interfering with GE43 by building awareness of foreign threats to Canada's electoral process and preparing the government to assess and respond to those threats. Despite its limited mandate, SITE continued to meet and promote coordination related to COVID-19. It is now focused on helping safeguard GE44,
- GAC/RRM continues to input into the overall SITE Foreign Interference threat assessment, and SITE members continue to develop and refine processes and templates for briefing senior officials, including NSIA and the P5.
- The RRM has resumed monitoring and monthly reporting in a similar fashion as was done in support of GE43; at the same time it continues to refine tools and methods to structure and analyze data. This includes both in house development work as well as working with CSE to help develop new tools to monitor and detect coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Author's name/division/tel: IOL/

Consulted divisions/departments: NIL

Approving ADM: IFM

Name and symbol of departmental officer attending/tel.: IOL/Gallit Dobner can attend if required.

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