

China views Canada as a 'high priority' for interference: CSIS report

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China sees Canada as a “high-priority target” and employs “incentives and punishment” as part of a vast influence network directed at legislators, business executives and diaspora communities in this country, according to a top-secret intelligence assessment from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

The CSIS report is an overview of Chinese government foreign interference in Canada, ranging from investigating a Conservative MP’s relatives in China to harassing a mainland Chinese student in Canada who publicly supported Hong Kong’s democracy movement.

The report warned that Beijing is the “foremost perpetrator” of foreign interference in Canada. Its agents are unconcerned about repercussions, the report says, because of the lack of obstacles such as a foreign-influence registry of the kind established in the United States and Australia.

It’s not known whether elected officials in Canada gained access to the report, which was produced by the agency’s Intelligence Assessment Branch and dated July 20, 2021, several weeks before the federal election campaign got under way. The assessment is presented as a “baseline for understanding the intent, motives and scope” of Beijing’s foreign interference in Canada.

The nine-page document, seen by The Globe and Mail, is the latest example of the warnings published by Canada’s security service in recent years that lay out a problem – and a solution. It’s marked top secret and for Canadian eyes only.

It warns that “absent real disincentives,” such as a foreign-influence registry and indictments of foreign-interference actors, Chinese targeting of Canada is “expected to continue and increase over time.”

“Threat actors almost certainly perceive their activities in Canada to be low-risk and high reward,” the assessment said.

The report, People’s Republic of China Foreign Interference in Canada: a Critical National Security Threat, lists several examples of Chinese influence operations aimed at the opposition Conservative Party.

It says CSIS reporting from 2021 indicates that China’s intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), “has taken specific actions to target Canadian MPs” who are linked to the February, 2021, parliamentary motion condemning Beijing’s oppression of Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities. The motion, which passed, declared China’s conduct to amount to genocide.

The spy agency said an MSS officer sought information on an unnamed Canadian MP’s relatives “who may be located in the PRC, for further potential sanctions.” This effort, the CSIS report said, “is almost certainly meant to make an example of this MP and deter others from taking anti-PRC positions.”

A national-security source, whom The Globe is not naming because they risk prosecution under the Security of Information Act, said the MP targeted was Conservative MP Michael Chong and that Zhao Wei, a Chinese diplomat in Canada, was working on this matter.

Mr. Chong, reached by The Globe, said he had no knowledge of this. He said he has relatives in Hong Kong. He was hit with sanctions by China in March, 2021, after sponsoring the parliamentary motion on genocide and has been careful not to contact his relatives since.

“This is more evidence of the PRC’s meddling in Canadian democracy and more evidence for Ottawa to take immediate action,” Mr. Chong said.

“To date, we’ve not had a single Chinese diplomat that’s been expelled. To date, we’ve not had a single individual charged because of this foreign interference.”

He said it's frustrating that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has yet to call a public inquiry and that the only information about foreign interference comes from whistleblowers.

The Chinese embassy in Ottawa did not respond to a request from The Globe for comment on the CSIS report.

In late 2020, CSIS said China's diplomats in Canada attempted to build inroads with members of the Conservative Party, "likely in an effort to engage with and steer away individuals from what the mission perceives to be anti-PRC portions of the Conservative Party's platform."

The Conservatives pledged in the 2021 election to ban Huawei Technologies from selling its 5G gear and to set up a foreign-agent registry to shed light on Canadian citizens paid to influence the political process on behalf of countries such as China or Russia.

The CSIS report said China sees Canada as a key target as it's a member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance, which also includes the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, because the country has a "robust reputation that can be used or co-opted to help legitimize [Chinese Communist] Party interests.

It said China seeks to shape political conduct and policy in order to persuade Canadian governments to reject or at least fail to support what it considers "problematic" U.S. administration policies. It also wants to generate positive portrayals of the Chinese government in Canada and increase the likelihood that Ottawa, the provinces and major cities "defer to PRC authority" where possible.

In addition, the report said Beijing seeks Canadian support for its controversial Belt and Road initiative, where China is pouring US\$1-trillion into building railways, ports and pipelines from Asia to Africa, as part of what critics regard as a state-directed effort to bolster Chinese political influence and extend the country's military reach.

The report said Beijing engages in clandestine and deception operations, principally through diplomats and proxies managed by the United Front Work Department (UFW), an organization that reports to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Its goal is to insert itself into diaspora communities and then mobilize them as political influencers and apply pressure in support of Beijing's interests.

“The CCP uses incentives and punishment to achieve its united front work objectives ... instilling fear that criticizing the PRC will negatively impact bilateral relations and jeopardize access to the PRC market,” CSIS said in the report.

To win favour with the Conservatives, CSIS said China's Calgary consulate tried to use a third party to influence a prominent Conservative MP, and similar attempts were made with senior party officials in Ottawa and Montreal. CSIS did not name the third party or the Conservatives approached on Beijing's behest.

CSIS said China also targets political staffers because they often act as “gatekeepers” for MPs, “thereby placing them in a position where they can deceptively control and influence the activities of elected officials in ways that support PRC activities.”

In October, 2020, CSIS said a former employee working for a member of an unnamed provincial legislator was fired for passing on information to a “person of high interest” to the spy agency “who is closely associated with the PRC Mission in Canada.”

“The confidential information included details on the elected official's activities, donor information, as well as office logistics and other staffers. Moreover, the former employee manipulated the official's schedule to ensure the MLA attended certain unspecified events,” the CSIS document said.

Of particular interest to Chinese spies and UFWD proxies are Canadian supporters of Taiwan, Tibet, Muslim Uyghurs, Falun Gong and Hong Kong's crushed democracy movement. CSIS said Beijing considers these dissidents as “critical threats’ and works to intimidate and silence them.

CSIS said in late 2020 that an MSS officer instructed an unnamed Canadian to identify dissidents associated with the five groups, which China calls the Five Poisons. “The MSS officer explained that, once the individuals linked to the Five Poisons are identified, the MSS officer could ‘mess with,’ and target them specifically if they return to the PRC.”

In December, 2019, CSIS said that a Chinese student, studying in Canada, was reported for holding “anti-communist views” because of his support for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement. Chinese state security had seized material from his electronic devices. The parents were instructed to tell their son to erase all his social-media accounts or he would be arrested, his family’s jobs taken away and his degree cancelled.

Chinese-language media in Canada are another primary target of Beijing influence operations, according to CSIS. These outlets are encouraged to “tell the China story well.” But China also tries to leverage non-Chinese-language media.

In October, 2020, the embassy paid a smaller Canadian media outlet, which CSIS did not identify, to produce a series of pro-Beijing articles. The magazine was also paid to distribute a questionnaire and told to pretend this came from the outlet itself.

China also actively works to create false-name social-media accounts to sprout Chinese propaganda and use fictitious Facebook personas to target dissidents, human-rights activists and journalists judged to be unfriendly to Beijing, CSIS said.

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