

CSIS briefed Trudeau that China targeted federal candidates in 2019 election, but no evidence of covert funding

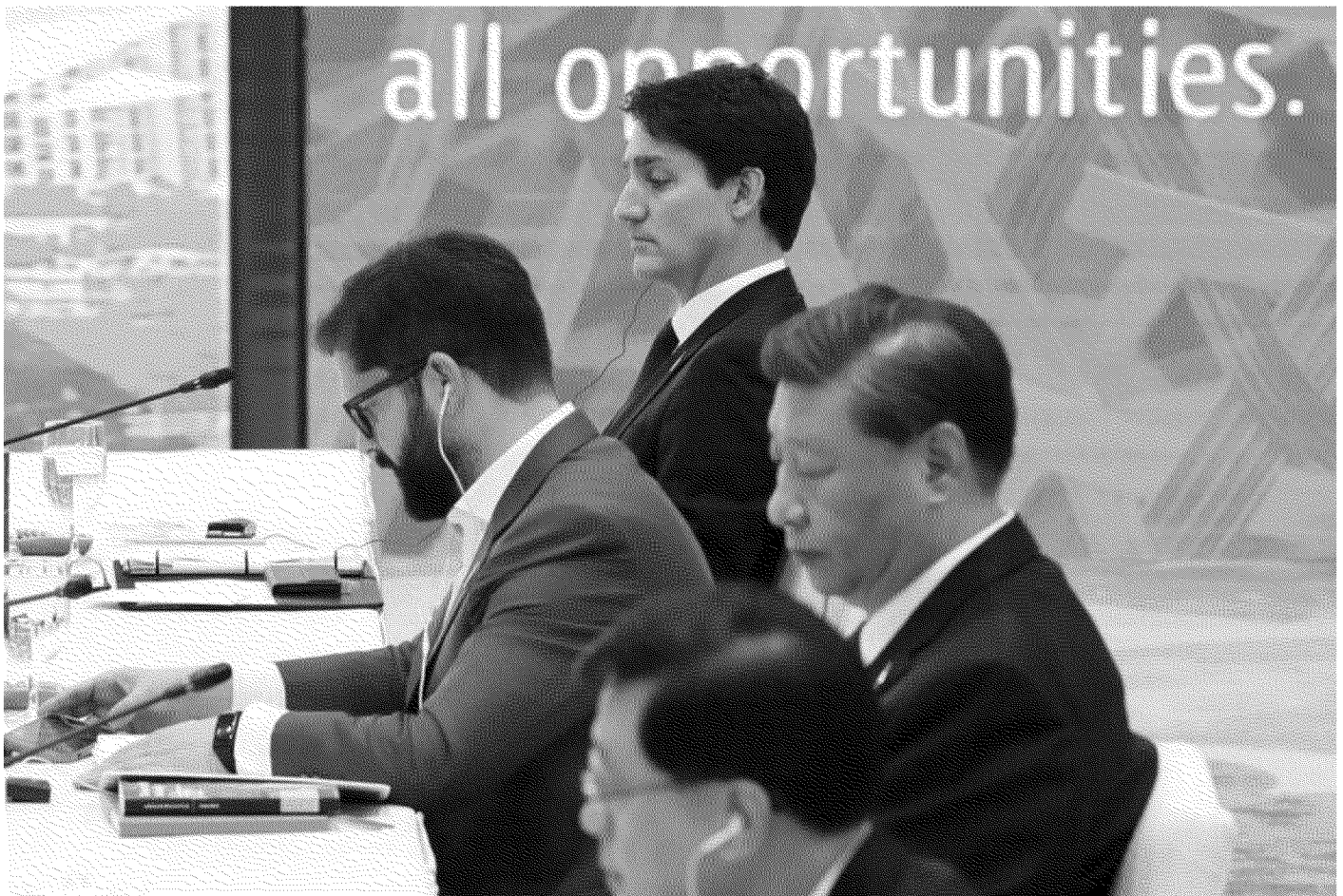
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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on Nov. 18.

SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau received a national security briefing this fall in which he was told China's consulate in Toronto had targeted 11 candidates in the 2019

federal election, but that security agencies had found no evidence of covert funding by Beijing, according to two sources with direct knowledge.

The sources said David Vigneault, director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, provided the briefing to Mr. Trudeau and his national security adviser Jody Thomas. Weeks later, in November, Mr. Trudeau met Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Group of 20 summit in Indonesia, and complained to him about interference in Canadian domestic affairs.

Mr. Trudeau was informed in the briefing that there was no evidence of Chinese money secretly flowing to the 11 candidates, all of whom were running in the Greater Toronto Area. He was also told there was no indication China's interference efforts had helped elect any of them, despite the consulate's attempts to promote the campaigns on social media and in Chinese-language media outlets.

The CSIS director told Mr. Trudeau that the spy agency had no evidence any of the candidates – a mixture of Liberals and Conservatives – were compromised by China, the sources said. Most of the candidates were Liberals, but the sources would not provide a breakdown of party affiliations. The Globe and Mail is not identifying the sources, because they were not authorized to discuss national security issues.

Mr. Trudeau was also informed that a Conservative MPP in the Ontario legislature had played a role in the Chinese election interference campaign, one of the sources said. And Mr. Vigneault mentioned pro-Beijing activities by a former provincial Liberal cabinet minister, but said his activities were unrelated to the 2019 election.

The source said the information was based on CSIS electronic and agent surveillance of the Toronto consulate, as well as its Chinese-Canadian proxies and friendship societies, which are closely aligned with Beijing's views.

On Nov. 7, Global News reported that Mr. Trudeau was told in a January briefing that the Toronto consulate had directed a clandestine transfer of funds to a network of at least 11 federal candidates running in the 2019 election, as well as many Beijing operatives who worked as their campaign staffers. Global News said \$250,000 was allegedly sent through an Ontario MPP and a federal election candidate's staff member.

Both sources who spoke to The Globe said they were not aware of that money transfer having occurred.

Mr. Trudeau has denied being briefed on the matter in January, and Ms. Thomas recently told a parliamentary committee “that we have not seen money going to 11 candidates, period.”

But the Prime Minister and his cabinet ministers have not answered directly when asked whether China tried to help elect 11 candidates.

In the briefing before the G20 summit, which also dealt with other high-level domestic matters, Mr. Trudeau expressed concern about the impact of identifying candidates and MPs who might not even be aware of the Chinese interference operations, the two sources said. He was told there was no evidence the candidates knew the Chinese consulate or its intermediaries were trying to help get them elected.

During its surveillance, CSIS observed an official from the Toronto consulate at a campaign event. Toronto is considered the epicentre of Chinese foreign interference operations, with Vancouver a close second, one of the sources told The Globe.

Several months before the October, 2019, federal election, former Liberal cabinet minister John McCallum, who had recently resigned his post as Canada’s ambassador to China, revealed he had warned Beijing against taking further punitive measures against Canada over the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, because doing so could lead to Mr. Trudeau being ousted from power.

Mr. McCallum told the South China Morning Post in July, 2019, that “anything that is more negative against Canada will help the Conservatives, [who] are much less friendly to China than the Liberals.”

Mr. Trudeau was also told, during the briefing, about illicit Chinese police stations operating in Canada, where personnel have allegedly coerced Chinese nationals living abroad into returning home, or into refraining from criticizing China’s rulers. The RCMP announced in October that it is investigating the alleged police stations, which were first uncovered by Spain-based human rights group Safeguard Defenders in September.

After the briefing, Mr. Trudeau travelled to the G20 meeting, where he made his comments to Mr. Xi in an informal conversation, according to the sources.

One of the sources said the Chinese police stations have effectively stopped operating, because the RCMP and CSIS have visited the locations as part of a coordinated investigation. China's ambassador to Canada, Cong Peiwu, was summoned by the Department of Global Affairs over the matter and instructed to close down the offices.

The source said Ottawa has not expelled any Chinese diplomats over the issue, because of concerns that this would result in a tit-for-tat expulsion of Canadian diplomats inside China.

As far back as the fall of 2020, CSIS publicly warned that the safety of Canadians was being jeopardized by undercover Chinese state security officials and others who were trying to silence Beijing's critics using tactics that included threats of retribution against their families in China.

The Commons procedure and House affairs committee is probing Chinese interference in Canadian affairs.

In a Nov. 28 letter to the committee, RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki said the Mounties are investigating broad foreign interference by China. She wrote that the RCMP lacked evidence of wrongdoing in the 2019 vote, but she noted that police are looking at wider interference by China, including "interference in democratic processes" in Canada.

According to a heavily redacted intelligence note that was released to the committee, dated Feb. 21, 2020, the government was warned after the 2019 federal election that the Chinese state had interfered in the campaign.

The note, which was prepared by the Privy Council Office, talks of "subtle but effective interference networks." It says "investigations into activities linked to the Canadian federal election in 2019 reveal an active foreign interference (FI) network."

Heavily redacted documents from CSIS show that Mr. Trudeau was briefed on foreign interference in January, 2020; January, 2021; and February, 2021.

On Feb. 9, 2021, Mr. Vigneault publicly warned that foreign interference “poses a significant threat to the integrity of our political system and democratic institutions,” and said China conducts influence operations among the Chinese-Canadian community and with Chinese-language media outlets.

In Nov. 1 testimony to the procedure and House affairs committee, Adam Fisher, director-general of intelligence assessments at CSIS, warned that China is the “foremost aggressor” when it comes to foreign interference in Western countries, and that it works within their political systems to “corrupt” them.

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