

Politics

Federal parties being warned of efforts by 6 foreign countries to influence election: sources

China, India trying to promote sympathetic candidates, say government and intelligence sources

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Canadian and Chinese flags seen prior to a meeting between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing Dec. 5, 2017. (Fred Dufour/The Associated Press)

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Canada's intelligence services are carefully monitoring the threat of agents of the Chinese and Indian governments working with diaspora communities here to influence the upcoming federal election, according to a number of sources who have been briefed on their activities.

Those sources — who spoke to CBC on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the record — also said intelligence services are monitoring efforts by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Venezuela to influence the election campaign, while an integrated intelligence unit has been giving political parties bi-weekly briefings about foreign actors' activities in Canada.

The government and intelligence sources said one of the ways foreign countries go about pushing their agenda in Canada is by attending nomination meetings to help select candidates favourable to their causes.



Participants attend a party nomination meeting in Winnipeg. Sources tell CBC News foreign countries are trying to exert influence over Canadian federal politics by securing the nominations of sympathetic candidates. (Sarah Petz/CBC)

These countries lean on the work of intelligence officials posing as diplomats in embassies and in consulates across the country, primarily in British Columbia and Ontario, said the sources.

Top Canadian officials were warned last year that China and India could try to use their links to diaspora communities in Canada to advance their own agendas.

The situation hasn't reached a level yet that would compel the critical election incident public protocol group — the government team set up to sound the alarm if it sees evidence of the October federal election being undermined — to go public.

Such physical interference is far from new in the world of international espionage, and the sources stressed that Canadian intelligence agencies are closely watching the actions of foreign countries in the time left before the Oct. 21 election.

- **'Inauthentic activity' in Alberta election a possible preview of tactics in the federal campaign, report warns**
- **Twitter bots emerge ahead of Canadian election, but influence is unclear**

Former CSIS director Ward Elcock, who also served as a deputy minister of national defence, called the tactics employed by China and India "old school" spying.

"It's not the new school of the Russians using the internet to interfere in the U.S. elections by moving public opinion in this direction or that direction. It's the old way of trying to recruit people, trying to secure influence and make connections," he said.

"Sometimes they're seeking influence. They would like to affect Canadian policies."

All of the nations said to be attempting to influence the election have reasons for trying to boost their clout with a key American ally like Canada. Iran and Saudi Arabia are at daggers-drawn after Tehran was blamed for a weekend attack on Saudi oil facilities. Pakistan is in a tense standoff with India over the disputed region of Kashmir, while Nicolas Maduro is under heavy international pressure to step down as president of Venezuela.

Canada has attacked Saudi Arabia's human rights record in the recent past and is part of the group of nations calling for Maduro's resignation.

China has policy objective

While Beijing's interest in Canada predates its more recent dispute with Ottawa over the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, the current state of tension has heightened Canadian intelligence agencies' concerns about the upcoming election, say sources.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chinese President Xi Jinping listen to opening remarks at a plenary session at the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan on Friday June 28, 2019. The Canada-China relationship has soured since December. (Adrian Wyld/Canadian Press)

For the longest time, sources say, Chinese intelligence efforts in Canada were directed toward securing economic advantages — by pilfering technology, for example — but Meng's arrest added another objective to China's espionage aims, according to security officials.

The Chinese government has been vocal about its displeasure with Canada ever since officials arrested Meng in Vancouver in December on an extradition request from the U.S. China has since arrested two Canadian men, accusing them of trying to violate national security.

- **China uses arbitrary detentions as 'tool' to achieve 'political goals': Trudeau**
- **Trudeau visits gurdwara after government removes reference to Sikh extremism**

Canadian intelligence officials insist that their countermeasures won't lead to further deterioration in the Canada-China relationship and jeopardize the safety of the two men detained by Beijing: Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat on leave with an NGO, and businessman Michael Spavor.

Outside of efforts to sway candidate nominations and elected MPs, sources speaking to CBC News said Chinese intelligence officers are also urging Chinese-Canadians to volunteer and join parties to help elect pro-China MPs.

They've encouraged members of diaspora communities to write China-friendly letters to the editor and start pro-Tibet and pro-Taiwan student associations on campuses, alongside the student groups which oppose the Hong Kong democracy protests, said the sources.

The Khalistan question

The Canada-India relationship is also delicate.

For decades, Indian governments have harboured a belief that Canada is soft on the movement for an independent Khalistan, a separate homeland for Sikhs.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is greeted by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi as he arrives for an official welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi, India on Friday, Feb. 23, 2018. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

The topic was discussed when prime ministers Justin Trudeau and Narendra Modi met last year during Trudeau's trip to India in early 2018. That trip became mired in controversy when news broke that Jaspal Atwal — convicted of trying to assassinate an Indian cabinet minister in B.C. in 1986 — was invited to dine with Trudeau at a formal event hosted by the Canadian High Commissioner in Delhi.

Earlier this year, Canada agreed to remove a reference to Sikh extremism from a report on terrorism after receiving pushback. [The 2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada](#) had listed Sikh extremism as one of the top five

extremist threats in Canada, but the text was changed to read, "extremists who support violent means to establish an independent state within India."

India's former ambassador to Canada Vishnu Prakash flatly denies the claim that his country is trying to influence the federal election.

"We do not have the ability nor the desire to influence the elections in any country," he said.

"I'm afraid the Canadian agencies are bashful about naming China alone and want to balance it by naming India, which is most unfortunate."

- [Five Eyes allies raising questions as damage control continues in Cameron Ortis case: sources](#)
- [Norad asked Canada to 'identify and mitigate' cyberthreats to critical civilian sites](#)

Jessica Davis, president of Insight Threat Intelligence and a former CSIS analyst, said efforts to influence an electorate through human agents have had mixed results.

"Sometimes it can be very effective and states can put a lot of money behind a particular candidate and potentially get the outcome that they want," she said. "But in other instances the electorate does what its wants to do and it's very difficult to influence that."

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has said publicly that "as [in] any country with a large multicultural population, diaspora groups within Canada are subject to clandestine and deceptive manipulation by certain foreign powers."

"Foreign interference in Canadian society – as a residual aspect of global or regional political and social conflicts, or divergent strategic and economic objectives – constitutes a threat to the security of Canada," says the CSIS website.

Foreign espionage back in the news

A spokesperson for CSIS wouldn't comment on operations and ongoing investigations but said the agency "collects information about foreign interference as well as hostile state activities and provides advice and intelligence assessments to the Government about these events."

"I would like to reassure Canadians that CSIS actively investigates and responds to all threats of foreign interference to Canada's democratic institutions – in whatever way that manifests itself – and supports the government of Canada's collective effort to respond accordingly," said John Townsend in an email to CBC.

Questions about foreign espionage were pushed into the headlines late last week when news broke that a top RCMP intelligence official had been charged under Canada's national secrets law.

Cameron Jay Ortis, 47, has been charged under three sections of the Security of Information Act. Most relate to preparing to share either safeguarded or operational information with a foreign entity or terrorist group in the past year.

Authorities still haven't said who Ortis is alleged to have been talking to, and why.

He was known for his expertise in East Asian affairs, critical infrastructure and the use of "bots" online. According to his LinkedIn profile, Ortis speaks Mandarin.

A government source who was briefed on the Ortis case said Canadian officials are worried because he was known as "the China expert."

With files from the CBC's Kristen Everson

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