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Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference
in Federal Electoral Processes and
Democratic Institutions

Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère
dans les processus électoraux et les
institutions démocratiques fédéraux

Interview Summary: Lyall King, Gallit Dobner, CSIS Representative, Lisa Ducharme

Lead officials from the 2021 **Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force** (“**SITE TF**”) were interviewed in a panel format by Commission counsel on February 12, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to classified information.

Notes to Reader:

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary has been produced in reliance on subclause (a)(iii)(C)(II) of the Commission’s Terms of Reference. It discloses the evidence pertinent to clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of the Commission’s Terms of Reference that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, would not be injurious to the critical interests of Canada or its allies, national defence or national security.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission’s mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Information provided during the interview that relates to other aspects of the Commission’s Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.
- This summary should be read with the Institutional Reports prepared by the Government of Canada and the unclassified Interview Summary prepared following the February 12, 2024, interview with officials from the 2019 SITE TF.

Background

SITE TF consists of members from the **Communications Security Establishment** (“**CSE**”), the **Canadian Security Intelligence Service** (“**CSIS**”), **Global Affairs Canada** (“**GAC**”) and the **Royal Canadian Mounted Police** (“**RCMP**”).

Lyall King was appointed Chair of the SITE TF in August of 2018, and served in this role until March of 2022. He also served as the SITE TF representative for CSE during this period.

Gallit Dobner served as the SITE TF representative for GAC during the 2019 and 2021 federal elections. She also led the **Rapid Response Mechanism** (“**RRM**”) team [RRM serves as the permanent secretariat for the G7 RRM, which strengthens coordination among G7 countries in order to identify and respond to diverse and evolving threats to democracies by sharing information and analysis and identifying opportunities for coordinated responses].

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The CSIS Representative¹ served as the SITE TF representative for CSIS upon appointment to the CSIS Intelligence Assessments Branch in early 2021. In this role, they coordinated CSIS's input and contributions to the SITE TF. They indicated that they are not a **subject-matter expert ("SME")** in **foreign interference ("FI")**, rather, a small group of CSIS SMEs assisted them in their SITE TF role. Before assuming this role, the CSIS Representative spent most of their career working in counterterrorism within CSIS.

Lisa Ducharme served as the SITE TF representative for the RCMP leading up to and during the 2021 election. She succeeded Eric Gordon. Ms. Ducharme described her role within the SITE TF as two-fold: (1) she was responsible for sharing criminal intelligence and situational awareness about RCMP's protective policing and event security roles with SITE stakeholders; and (2) she was responsible for ensuring law enforcement expertise could be provided when necessary. Ms. Ducharme also provided RCMP senior leadership with ongoing awareness of SITE TF activities and matters as required.

Background Information

Lessons Learned from 2019

Mr. King discussed the lessons SITE TF learned from the 2019 election. He referred to the SITE TF After Action Report,² and indicated that little changed at the operational level after the 2019 elections. He explained that SITE TF had worked well in 2019, and planned to function similarly in the lead-up to and during the 2021 election period. Mr. King acknowledged, however, that the 2019 elections revealed information sharing weaknesses within SITE TF. This led SITE TF to modify its terms of reference to include Principles of Engagement in order to address this issue.

Key Distinctions between the 2019 and 2021 Elections

The CSIS Representative noted that the 2021 election was not a fixed-date election, and it was not clear when an election would be called.

The SITE TF maintained monthly touchpoints after the 2019 election. In late 2020, Elections Canada indicated that they were preparing for a spring 2021 election. SITE TF increased its readiness activities and meeting tempo to match that timeline.

CSIS also anticipated an election at some point in 2021 and therefore was positioning itself by early spring to ensure they were ready. CSIS initiated an "elevated election stance" starting on August 16, 2021, which meant that they reported intelligence to the SITE TF using a strict 48-hour turnover protocol during the 2021 election period. This stance ended a week or two after election day to assess reactions to the election results.

The CSIS Representative and Ms. Ducharme noted that, during the 2021 election period, there was a high demand from different government clients for updates on the domestic threat landscape. The election occurred during COVID, during which there were heightened "temperatures", including an increase in threats to protected persons, violent online rhetoric, and sometimes violent behaviour at campaign events. The SITE TF offered Elections Canada a briefing on ideologically motivated threats, and how the RCMP triages and assesses such threat

¹ The identity of the CSIS representative must remain secret for national and personal security reasons.

² CAN002359.

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information. In addition, the political parties requested that their cleared political members be jointly briefed by the SITE TF on assessed FI threats going into the 2021 elections.

Mr. King stated that the SITE TF baseline threat assessment in 2021 was different than 2019. There was concern about elections security in the wake of the January 6, 2021 Capitol Hill riots. In addition, the security and intelligence community had put more emphasis on collection activities related to **People's Republic of China ("PRC")** foreign interference. Further, the PCO intelligence priorities had changed since 2019. China was an increased focus.

Threat Identification

Ms. Dobner reflected on the RRM's ability to detect disinformation during the 2021 election. The RRM faced far greater challenges in 2021 than in 2019 because the online environment had evolved considerably during that two-year period. Ms. Dobner referred to the technological leaps made during that period, the increased sophistication of disinformation methods used by foreign actors – notably the PRC – and the prevalence of new, alternative social media platforms which refused to establish a protocol for countering online disinformation.

Ms. Dobner said it was challenging for RRM to identify disinformation campaigns during the elections, considering the scale of necessary monitoring, the difficulties accessing metadata absent the cooperation of social media platforms, and the linguistic challenges related to monitoring online publications in various languages (Mandarin, Hindi, etc.). The RRM was composed of only five to six analysts, limiting the results that RRM could realistically achieve.

Mechanics of Intelligence Sharing with the Panel of Five

Mr. King explained that representatives of SITE TF member organizations met with the Panel of Five weekly to discuss SITE TF reporting during the 2021 election writ period. The individuals who normally attended the weekly meetings were the CSE Chief (Shelly Bruce), the CSIS Director (David Vigneault), the RRM's representative (Gallit Dobner) and the RCMP representative (Lisa Ducharme). The CSIS Representative stated that the CSIS Director was prepared by CSIS SMEs in advance of these weekly briefings to the Panel of Five.

The weekly meetings were divided into two periods. First, representatives from SITE TF member organizations briefed the Panel of Five on the ongoing threats to the 2021 election and answer any questions they had. Second, the Panel of Five deliberated in private.

Specific Issues

The 2021 SITE TF members were asked to comment on a number of specific issues related to the FI-related intelligence gathered during and after the 2021 election.

August 17, 2021| This SITREP referenced a Member of Parliament ("MP") reporting cultivation and elicitation attempts by an official of a foreign state.³ The CSIS Representative noted that this was the second day of the election campaign and stated that, when deciding what to send to the Panel of Five, CSIS erred on the side of providing more intelligence than less.

³ CAN001061.

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August 19, 2021 | This SITREP referenced a *Global Times* article that called on users to sign a petition to release Meng Wanzhou.⁴ Ms. Dobner stated that this SITREP was produced simply to signal to the Panel of Five that this story was on the RRM's radar.

August 20, 2021 | This SITREP referenced information related to an effort on the part of Indian officials to promote India.⁵ The CSIS Representative explained that although this intelligence may not clearly appear to be FI-related, it was included in the SITREP because normal overt engagement can become covert FI activity over time. Thus, this SITREP indicated to the Panel of Five that CSIS was monitoring the official's activities for possible later digressions.

August 23, 2021 | This SITREP referenced the report of a foreign official liaising with a member of a political campaign to discuss potentially sharing confidential information about the campaign and possibly arranging an introduction with the electoral candidate.⁶ The CSIS Representative explained how hostile states operate and how they lay the groundwork. The CSIS Representative reiterated that the accumulation of activities undertaken by hostile states and/or their proxies can become less transparent and deceptive or clandestine over time.

SITREP #5 | This document summarizes an August 30, 2021 briefing by SITE TF member organization senior representatives (CSIS DIR, CSE Chief, GAC Rep) to the Panel of Five regarding foreign interference.⁷ CSIS Representative stated that they not aware of any response to SITE TF from the Panel of Five.

CSIS also debriefed security-cleared **Liberal Party of Canada ("LPC")** officials on this matter.

In explaining what was meant by "grey zones" in the context of assessing whether an activity is FI, the CSIS Representative referenced a SITE TF update to the Panel of Five, which states: "While many diplomatic activities are consistent with international practices and influence-based approaches to foreign relations, in some grey-zone areas, the accumulation of influence activities over time can shift into covert efforts that lack transparency. Accordingly such malign efforts will be reported to the GC when such situations are identified."⁸

August 25, 2021 | This SITREP discussed an individual who was assessed to be a foreign interference proxy.⁹ The CSIS Representative stated that they did not recall this intelligence but thought the individual involved may have been the same as the proxy referenced in SITREP #9(below) in the context of intelligence reporting arising after the election. The CSIS Representative confirmed following the interview that this individual was the same as the proxy referenced in SITREP #9 (below).

August 31, 2021 | This SITREP indicated that WeChat news accounts in Canada had been posting what appeared to be a false story which claimed that the CPC leader would ban WeChat

⁴ CAN012830.

⁵ CAN003568.

⁶ CAN002924.

⁷ [Reference to a classified document].

⁸ [Reference to a classified document].

⁹ CAN001067.

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if elected.¹⁰ This intelligence was complemented by two SITE TF briefings to the Panel of Five dated September 7, 2021¹¹ and September 23, 2021.¹²

Ms. Dobner noted that SITE TF took this intelligence seriously, as evidenced by the high volume of reporting on the issue. Although there were suspicions that this could be a disinformation campaign that was PRC-backed, RRM was not able to definitively make this assessment. She added that WeChat is not a platform with which RRM has an agreement and so its inner workings are not accessible by RRM. Ms. Ducharme added that for the RCMP to respond, there would have had to have been an offence.

September 10, 2021 | This SITREP discusses reporting by a Chinese-Canadian newspaper on WeChat which claimed that Bill C-282, introduced by MP Kenny Chiu, would require “all individuals or groups with ties to China” to register as agents of the Chinese government.¹³ Following the interview, Ms. Dobner confirmed that RRM first witnessed false narratives about Kenny Chiu on WeChat news accounts on September 9, 2021. For similar reasons as above, she stated that the RRM was not able to assess if this WeChat activity was a PRC-backed campaign or organic activity.

SITREP #9 | The SITE TF After Action Report indicated that intelligence had come to light post-election regarding a Government of India proxy agent who may have attempted to interfere in democratic processes. SITE TF assessed that this new intelligence appeared to corroborate that “Indian FI may have occurred in a covert manner” and that the Government of India intended to “influence the outcome of Canadian elections”.¹⁴

Mr. King stressed that this intelligence was obtained after the 2021 election writ period and that it was shared with the Panel of Five.

According to Ms. Ducharme, the intelligence was also brought to her attention separately by her intelligence team. That report would have also been shared with select RCMP individuals via the RCMP’s **Sensitive Information Handling Unit (“SIHU”)**, which is responsible for the dissemination of security intelligence within the RCMP to track its distribution and ensure it does not inadvertently impact a law enforcement investigation, thereby creating a potential legal disclosure or ‘intelligence to evidence’ dilemma.

The intelligence appeared to reveal what could be considered a potential *Criminal Code* offence, so Ms. Ducharme engaged with Federal Policing National Security authorities to obtain their direction on how to proceed with sharing the security intelligence internal to the RCMP.

Ms. Ducharme is unaware if there is an active investigation.

Ms. Ducharme used this example to illustrate how SITE TF complements and supports existing information channels between SITE TF member organizations FI sharing, but that it is not the only one. She pointed to the “One Vision” framework between the RCMP and CSIS as another such information sharing channel.

¹⁰ CAN012842.

¹¹ [Reference to a classified document].

¹² [Reference to a classified document].

¹³ CAN012852, p. 2.

¹⁴ CAN002359, p. 2.

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CPC's letter of concerns regarding FI during the 2021 election | During the 2021 election, the CPC sent a letter of concern to the **Privy Council Office ("PCO")** about its belief that candidates were being targeted by FI, mainly through disinformation campaigns online. The letter was transferred by PCO to SITE TF. SITE TF responded to the CPC, through PCO, and advised that they could not conclude that the media narratives identified were clandestinely or deceptively orchestrated by the PRC. SITE TF acknowledged that the media narratives echoed points that were openly stated by the PRC. Mr. King explained that the list of concerns identified by the CPC did not appear to meet the definition of FI used by SITE TF. The CSIS Representative stated that it was very difficult to conclusively determine the extent to which the PRC attempted to influence the outcome of the election in the ridings.

To attribute an action to a foreign state, Mr. King noted that they need to be able to determine that the activity in issue was carried out by a foreign state or at the behest of a foreign state with a high degree of confidence. He agreed that SITE TF would essentially need a "smoking gun".

Ms. Dobner agreed and emphasized that GAC/RRM could not be certain that the false narratives in the media were FI, despite some indicators. These activities could range from organic activity; a PRC backed campaign; or "grey zone" activity whereby the PRC supporters in Canada and elsewhere share narratives they believed were in line with the PRC position. Ms. Dobner recalled the reason for the Panel of Five's high threshold for making public FI-related intelligence was that such a finding could affect election results and severely impact Canada's relations with a foreign country.