



FOREIGN INTERFERENCE / INFLUENCE IN CANADA: A WAY FORWARD

Date: June 15, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On June 15, 2023, Mr. Bob Young, security consultant and former Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Regional Director for British Columbia and Yukon, presented *Foreign Interference / Influence in Canada: A Way Forward*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver Executives. The key points discussed were the characteristics of foreign interference and influence (FI), how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conducts FI in Canada, and what actions the Canadian government and its agencies can take to better counter the threat of FI.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Young discussed the history of CSIS and how it has pivoted from focusing on terrorism and espionage to countering FI. He explained that the predominant foreign state actors engaged in FI in Canada are Russia, China, and Iran. He then focused on the strategies and tactics used by the CCP to conduct FI in Canada. The discussion included an overview of the nature of FI, the impact of FI, and what Canadian institutions can do going forward to combat the threat of FI.

BACKGROUND

Mr. Young began by noting that CSIS has recently been pivoting from its traditional focus on countering espionage and terrorism to countering FI due to the increased attention it has received. He explained that for CSIS to investigate FI, it must satisfy the following elements: clandestine and determinantal to Canadian security interests, serious, insidious, corrosive, opaque, unchecked, and effective. Mr. Young noted that FI has gone unchallenged for the last several years and that Canada is behind other Western countries, including its Five Eyes partners, in countering the threat. FI can negatively impact rights and freedoms

protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights, decrease public trust in democratic institutions, hinder media reporting, and erode sovereignty.

Mr. Young explained that a principal focus of the CCP in Canada is to blunt regime criticism and influence the government to be more favorable towards Chinese foreign and domestic policy. The CCP is particularly focused on countering support for causes described as the Five Poisons: independence for Taiwan, the plight of the Uyghurs, Tibet, members of the Chinese democracy movement, and Falun Gong. Mr. Young emphasized that anyone in China or Canada that advocates for these causes is at risk of being surveilled by the CCP.

Mr. Young then detailed the specific tactics used by the CCP for conducting FI that range from crude to sophisticated, including harassment, monitoring, surveillance, coercion, intimidation, and detention. FI can take the form of the CCP threatening to withhold visas, business contracts, and research grants. Secondary institutions in Canada greatly depend on revenue from foreign students from China and this can be used by the CCP as leverage for conducting FI. Other forms of FI that Mr. Young discussed included developing covert relationships with people of influence, cyber-attacks, election interference, disinformation campaigns, and self-censorship.

Mr. Young pointed out that most countries primarily rely on their intelligence agencies to conduct FI, whereas the CCP actively uses Chinese citizens to conduct FI. Mr. Young highlighted that this is challenging for Canada as the CCP can conduct FI by obliging Chinese citizens in Canada to cooperate with their security services.

Mr. Young concluded his presentation by explaining that Canadian agencies need increased cooperation and transparency on the societal threats of FI to properly counter it. It is crucial that other agencies cooperate with CSIS when they have intelligence regarding FI in Canada and that RCMP investigations into FI result in arrests. Mr. Young suggested the enactment of a Foreign Agent Registry and the creation of a fact-checking agency by the federal government as potential solutions for countering FI.

Question and Answer

Is there an increase in coordination between individual state actors engaging in FI?

Mr. Young explained that the interests of state actors are unique and there is not a great commonality in the coordination of their FI activities.

Is a Foreign Agent Registry the right solution and what would other options be?

Mr. Young mentioned that a Foreign Agent Registry is needed; however, he pointed out that it will only be useful for informing consultants or those being lobbied about the countries that are paying them. Mr. Young emphasized that a Foreign Agent Registry will not fully eliminate FI but can serve as a helpful tool.

At what point should CSIS or the RCMP investigate FI and what should the criteria be?

Mr. Young recommended that CSIS should have the ability to investigate FI when they have intelligence regarding a potential threat. However, CSIS has a lower threshold than law enforcement does for conducting criminal investigations and that gap needs to be addressed.

How has foreign interference changed within the threat landscape during your career?

Mr. Young expressed that technology has accelerated FI, and noted that the threat of FI from the CCP has risen in recent years due to a number of factors, including the lack of pushback from the Canadian government.

How does China's Belt and Road Initiative and economic development in countries such as Africa play a role in FI?

Mr. Young pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative can be used as economic leverage, especially in countries within Africa due to their reliance on the infrastructure it provides. Mr. Young noted that economic leverage can be used lawfully; however, he explained that the CCP employs a wide variety of unlawful FI techniques as well.

Given the proliferation of data flow coming out of China, what is the intelligence gap that needs to be addressed by our next generation of analysts to address this problem?

Mr. Young highlighted that CSIS is pivoting to address the intelligence gap regarding China, including the recruitment of tactical and strategic analysts who are subject matter experts on China. However, this is a timely process that requires developing language skills and in-depth knowledge of China.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- CSIS has been pivoting in recent years to focus more on countering FI; however, a government-wide recalibration is needed to properly counter the threat.
- For CSIS to investigate FI the following elements need to be satisfied: clandestine and determinantal to Canadian security interests. FI can negatively impact rights and freedoms protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights, decrease public trust in democratic institutions, hinder media reporting and erode sovereignty.
- The CCP employs a wide variety of techniques and strategies for conducting FI that range from crude to sophisticated. The CCP takes a whole society approach on conducting FI which makes it challenging to counter.
- The next generation of analysts will need to develop language skills and subject matter expertise on China to adequately counter its FI activities.
- Public transparency on FI will be crucial for deterring threat actors and emboldening members of diaspora communities to report coercion and abuse to authorities. Greater cooperation, coordination, and transparency among Canadian institutions is essential for countering the threat of FI.

FURTHER READING

- Adams Unger, G. (2021). Red Scare Three: Now with Chinese Characteristics. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 4(1), 26–44. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i1.2748>
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- McAuley, W. (2021). Jurisdictional Challenges in the 21st Century Security Environment: Subnational Design-Basis Threats. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 4(1), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i1.2749>



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