

**Foreign Interference in a Geopolitical Context:  
Transnational Linkages, Diaspora Mobilisation and Grey Zone Conflict**

Just as Canada has been at the forefront of creating a multicultural society, so too, can Canada be at the forefront of thinking through how to create a foreign, defence and security policy that responds to that reality.

Submission to the Foreign Interference Commission

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## **Introduction**

The threat of foreign interference continues to grow and evolve as the geopolitical structure of the world changes. Canada is often targeted by adversaries, and allies, who seek to advance their interests through transnational means, such as mobilising diaspora groups and hybrid tactics (Carment & Belo, 2022c). These actions are typically not considered a type of open warfare, but they are efforts to both influence and interfere in a country's internal economic and political processes. As we know, democratic states, like Canada, cannot guarantee complete immunity from interference without becoming the enemies of their own open societies (Carment & Belo, 2019; Carment & Belo, 2021a). To make open societies fully resistant to harmful influences would render them closed societies (Carment et. al., 2018; Carment & Samy, 2019).

At the same time, the risks that interference poses from both friend and foe should not be an excuse to foreclose on opportunities for growth and investment. Canada is, ultimately, a trading nation and, as a middle power, has a degree of agency that should be fully exploited to advance economic and political opportunities (Carment, Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022). The desire for a strong, secure Canada need not undermine the country's competitiveness and productivity (Carment & Nimijean, 2021).

In light of these concerns, this submission examines the threat of foreign interference in Canada. First, it investigates the presence of foreign interference, as well as transnational repression in the Canadian context. It then considers ways in which Canada has attempted to both protect and mobilise its diaspora for foreign and domestic policy purposes in a comparative context. Lastly, it provides some general recommendations for the Government of Canada (GoC) to counter the threat of foreign interference. Specifically, this submission calls for a forward-

looking strategy that will mobilise diaspora populations through principled, accountable, transparent and responsible leadership.

In reality, Canada's interests in foreign interference are driven by two views of the world, both carefully balanced with ebbs and flows over the last 150 years or so. The first, is one of deepening integration within the North American context, to the point where Canada and the US embrace a common security and economic community. This process leads us to a situation, now underway, in which the institutions shared between Canada and the United States (US), of which there are many, are leveraged to the advantage of the more powerful nation (Carment & Sands, 2019).

Unlike other US allies, such as European Union (EU) member states, Canada has significantly less room for maneuver across geopolitical axes, and fewer opportunities to engage the world in areas that are not dominated by the US, or directly influenced by the bilateral relationship. Fundamental to this relationship is the realisation, as unpalatable as it might be, that Canada must not only navigate a world in which it is increasingly subservient to US interests, it must also find a way to offset harmful US policies.

It is a sad reality that in terms of trade actions, Canada has had more direct harm from the US than it has from China, perhaps unsurprising given the volume of trade differentials. However, Canada has also had to contend with what may be termed "indirect" actions by the US. These actions include the enforcement of unilateral US sanctions and economic pressure to follow US foreign policy (Carment, Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022 – see chapters by Dade and Chin; Foreign Policy Report Card, 2019; Foreign Policy Report Card, 2022).

If this relationship is problematic, it is simply because Canada's strategic environment is becoming increasingly bifurcated, rendering Canada's foreign policy progressively disjointed

and contradictory. Overcoming policy incoherence is a major challenge. On the one hand, Canada's defence and security policies are borne from a highly integrated US-Canada security architecture that emerged strongly from 9/11 onward. Few of the defence and security elites (and those bureaucracies, think tanks and universities they represent) are giving balanced advice on what Canada's core long term interests are, preferring instead to provide narrowly constructed guidance, often issued in the absence of proper public debate. When debate does occur in the House of Commons (HoC) or in Special Committees, the ideology and the pandering plainly shine through. Canada is now pressured to follow America's security agenda, even if that means compromising our values and our economic interests (Carment & Belo, 2021a; Carment & Belo 2021b; Carment, Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022).

On the other hand, a second path looks beyond continentalism, where interference is likely to come in a less direct, but no less damaging, form (Carment & Belo, 2020). Indeed, if Canada's changing demography and sources of economic prosperity portend Canada's concerns about foreign interference, then our elected officials must look beyond North America (Carment, Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022).

Arguably, Canada's greatest strength is its people. Over the last half of the 20th century, Canada saw a significant increase in the number of individuals joining together through collective action, working to create positive societal change at home and abroad (Bratt & Kukucha 2015; Carment & Samy, 2015). Today, there have been better times for civil society in Canada. We all experienced the Harper years, when many prominent activist groups, working overseas lost government funding and government policies served to muzzle dissenting voices (Carment & Samy, 2015). These measures took a toll on the viability and efficacy of internationally oriented NGOs and other civil society organizations working abroad in war zones

and developing countries (Carment & Belo, 2021b). Today, Canada is badly positioned to exercise influence in the world (Foreign Policy Report Card, 2022; Foreign Policy Report Card, 2019; Cameron et al., 2023; Carment, 2024).

At the same time, our government remains less open to the type of scrutiny, public debate and engagement that are needed for it to act effectively, accountably, and transparently (Carment & Sands, 2019; Cameron et al., 2023). Democratic institutions in Canada are frail because the voices of dissent are both diffuse and dependent. The absence of mechanisms to hold governments to their commitments of accountability and transparency suggest we, as a nation, are simply not mature enough to engage in serious debate about the varieties of foreign interference impacting Canada, especially when it is our allies who are the ones responsible for interfering (Foreign Policy Report Card, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

The combination of a frail democracy and a weak civil society matters because of Canada's momentous demographic shifts (Cameron et al., 2023). With more than 20% of the Canadian population now born overseas (the figure is closer to 40% in large metropolitan centres), the country will continue to identify as, and reflect in reality, a true ethnic mosaic (Carment & Bercuson, 2008). In 2023, the vast majority (97.6%) of Canada's population growth came from international migration (both permanent and temporary immigration) and the remaining portion (2.4%) came from natural increase. As of now, Canadians do a reasonably good job of integrating newcomers, with good but often uneven access to social services including language and employment training (Carment et al., 2022). Canada is a nation of immigrants, which despite recent and much needed criticisms, has, thus far, managed to avoid

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<sup>1</sup> The bigger threat to Canadian democracy is the creeping incursion of the political appointee into federal and provincial bureaucracies (Foreign Policy Report Card, 2019). These "special advisors" and political operatives have only one purpose and that is to maximise political gains for the ruling party rather than act in the public interest.

some of the major problems of societal breakdown seen in Europe and the US. Yet the ghettoization of immigrant communities and a sense of “otherness” pervade many groups. In confronting these challenges, Canada must not only demonstrate leadership on sustaining a tolerant multicultural society, it must think through how to create a foreign, defence and security policy that responds to that reality (Carment, 2024; Carment & Nimijean. 2021).

### **Foreign Interference**

How then, does a country as demographically diverse and dependent on international trade and commerce, like Canada, navigate a world where interference lurks around every corner? Interference is a broad term that describes states using “covert and deceptive” mechanisms, including threatening or intimidating a country’s citizens, in order to advance their own strategic objectives (Justice Canada, n.d., p.1). The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) states that the term involves “attempts to covertly influence, intimidate, manipulate interfere, corrupt or discredit individuals, organizations and governments to further the interests of a foreign country” (National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians [NSICOP], 2024, p.4).

They elaborate that such actions can be perpetrated by both state and non-state actors and can target Canadian entities both within and outside the country’s borders. Often, these actions are attempts to deceptively impact GoC “politics, officials or democratic processes in support of foreign political agendas” (CSIS as cited in NSICOP, 2024, p.4).

It is crucial to distinguish between “legitimate” foreign influence and “illegitimate” foreign interference. When attempts to influence another country’s actions are done in the “open” (though the term “open” is itself open to debate; see: Carment & Belo, 2018; Carment &

Belo, 2020) and does not include direct threats to specific groups or individuals, these efforts could be described as legitimate foreign influence. However, even in situations where “influence” is being exercised, there will always be those who are impacted, negatively or positively. Indeed, it would be naïve to assume that influence is simply another form of diplomacy because the end goals, if not the means through which that influence is exercised, lack transparency (Carment & Belo, 2018).

Foreign interference is assumed to be dangerous because of its covert nature (Hogue, 2024). Foreign influence is also “dangerous” if the people and institutions that are its targets are impacted negatively or harmed. Consider America’s extraterritorial overreach, which has become more and more worrisome (Washington Post, 2024; Carment & Belo, 2020, 2021a; Carment & Belo 2021b). Simply put, the increasing presence of economic coercion in American foreign policy is a reflection of the inability of international institutions to moderate the country’s foreign policy choices; choices that inherently cause direct harm to Canada.

For example, despite US efforts to damage Huawei’s ability to deliver 5G technology around the world, the multinational company has made significant inroads in Asian, South American and even African markets. Only *after* the two Micheals debacle was resolved, did it become clear that the US did not have a viable alternative to Huawei’s 5G technology or the broader Belt and Road Initiative that will deliver 5G. By allowing itself to be pinned down by US extraterritorial overreach on the Huawei file, Canada neglected to consider the economic benefits from a key driver of technological growth.

The Huawei fallout is less about spying and Chinese malfeasance and more about American industry – if not Canadian - being outpaced by a more viable competitor (Carment & Belo, 2020). This is the entangled web of foreign relations that Canada must navigate. In

essence, this is the securitization of Canada's trade and diplomatic agenda, where any action deemed counter to America's security interests is sanctionable (Washington Post, 2024; Moeini & Carment, 2023).

Indeed, the Meng Wanzhou trial, the two Michaels and decisions over 5G are merely the prelude. The Biden administration's Innovation and Competition Act contains three sections of legislation, with more than 30 specific references, devoted to Canada (S.1260 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021, 2021). The Act will bind Canada to a series of policy actions intended to compete with China in the crucial domains of information technology, aerospace, and defence, impinging upon all aspects of academic research, technology transfer and capacity building for Canadian universities. Canadian academic freedom is at stake, and our ability to retain a competitive innovative edge is being severely compromised (Carment & Belo, 2020; Carment & Belo, 2021a).

Today, Canada must navigate the "grey zone" between malign influence and interference (when foreign actors use legitimate channels for covert activities, thus making it difficult to detect and classify as foreign interference) (Hogue, 2024; Carment et al., 2022). It is also crucial to make the distinction between foreign interference and lobbying; while lobbying is an overt process that is openly declared by the host state, and aligned with the *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, foreign interference is not (NSICOP, 2024). Importantly, an action can be classified as interference when the foreign state takes clear actions to "hide its involvement, direction or funding" (NSICOP, 2024, p.7).

There are several different targets of foreign interference. Frequent targets include political candidates or officials, public servants, interest groups and the media (Hogue, 2024). Often, states specifically target diaspora groups, seeking to silence or mobilise individuals who



may speak negatively of their home country in order to control public opinion and narratives (Hogue, 2024; Guardian, 2014).

Democratic institutions and processes are a common target of foreign interference campaigns. The Canada Elections Act states that it is a recognizable offence for “certain persons, including an individual who is not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, a foreign corporation or entity, a foreign political party, a foreign government or its agent, to during an election period, unduly influence an elector to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate or registered party” (Canada Elections Act as cited in Justice Canada, n.d.). Accordingly, foreign states will utilize deception or intimidation techniques to persuade and manipulate individuals into voting for specific candidates, who may be more likely to support policies that align with the foreign country’s larger strategic goals.

Arguably the more important issue that must be addressed is not malign influence over electoral outcomes, but domestic unrest imported from abroad. For example, in research that Carment conducted for the Criminal Intelligence Services of Canada (CISC) in the development of a Criminogenic Early Warning system, non-state actors were of significant concern to police enforcement (CIFP: Organized crime & Intelligence, n.d.). Several case studies showed that “blow back” is an ongoing and serious issue for Canada, especially in regards to organised criminal activity involving mobilised diasporas (with specific reference to Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Latin America, Russia and Haiti). (Prest et al., 2009; CIFP: Organized crime & Intelligence, n.d.).

The process of importing conflict abroad – even low intensity criminal activity- is referred to as conflict transportation (Feron & Baser, 2024). Conflict transportation “pertain(s) to processes whereby de-territorized conflicts take root and occur in other territories and space, and

in particular diaspora settings” with “actors, ideas, values and narratives of conflict” being transmitted between home countries and diaspora settings abroad (Feron & Baser 2024, Prest et al., 2009). Research shows that the process of conflict transportation can be triggered by various factors including latent rivalries emerging from colonial occupation (Faist, 2000; Papastergiadis, 1997; Feron, 2017); homeland nationalism, including the strong ties that diaspora members have to their home countries (Anderson, 1992; Skrbiš, 1999 as cited in Feron, 2023, see also Carment & Calleja, 2018; Prest et al., 2009); and the actions of host countries, including a lack of effort to integrate diaspora members into society, resulting in youth becoming re-invested in their homeland (Feron, 2017). Conflict transportation can take many forms including actions that are both political and discursive such as “verbal and symbolic violence” (Feron, 2017, p.364; Feron & Baser, 2024).

To operationalise these linkages, Carment and Calleja (2018) illustrate how proxy diaspora indicators are related to the performance of fragile and conflict affected states.<sup>2</sup> The idea of diaspora linkages between home and host state builds on the ideas of positionality and alignment for each diaspora group within Canada (for details on positionality and alignment see Carment et al., 2022) When countries possess high positionality and alignment, they are more capable of influencing positive change within their homelands, including their homeland’s conflict dynamics (see: Carment & Calleja, 2018 and Carment, Nikolko & MacIsaac, 2021 in the Ukraine context). Notably, this model allows us to analyze the extent to which diaspora are mobilised transnationally; and in turn exercise abilities to influence Canadian GoC policies on

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<sup>2</sup> Each component is evaluated through proxy indicators: authority, through governance and regulatory frameworks and remittances; legitimacy, through foreign direct investment (FDI) and property rights; and, capacity, through micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and trade.

issues of strategic importance to their home country (for specific linkages and policy options see: Carment, et al., 2022b on diaspora diplomacy).

For instance, Palestine's weak alignment and positionality in Canada indicate the group has historically had only limited influence with Canadian politicians in generating positive change in their homeland. This is consistent with the fact that the Palestinian diaspora is unable to secure clear commitments within Canada's foreign policy bureaucracies to address ongoing and serious human rights violations in Palestine since the beginning of the war on Gaza on October 7, 2023.

The case of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada is similar. In evaluating its relationship with Canada, Eritrea has suffered from low FDI, poor property rights, and minimal trade relations. While the country does enjoy relatively high remittance flows, these come from diaspora members out of concern for their friends and family members and to some extent controversial fund-raising by the Eritrean government akin to the "taxation" activities carried out by Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (The Globe and Mail, 2013). Together, these underdeveloped linkages point to the poor alignment and positionality of the Eritrean diaspora within Canada.

The relatively limited inability of these diasporas to directly exercise influence within Canada suggest that it would be resource-depleting for foreign states to mobilise these communities using traditional forms of covert interference. When positionality and alignment are poor such groups are more likely to rely on transnational organisations to engage foreign states covertly, in the same way favoured, for example, by the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka when the LTTE held sway (See Carment et al., 2022b on diaspora diplomacy).

In the next section we probe these issues with respect to interference within Canada, specifically discussing state and non state perpetrators, targets and tactics.

### **Foreign Interference in Canada: A Comparative Analysis**

Canadian intelligence has suggested that several nations have attempted to influence Canada's elections results by interfering in Canada's federal democratic processes. In a 2019 review of the Government Response to Foreign Interference, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) denoted Russia as the second largest foreign interference "threat" after China (though the actual activities in which they are engaged are not at all clearly delineated). In its 2024 report, NSICOP notes that Canada was not a high priority for Russia; instead, the country focused its efforts on larger strategic priorities, as well as its competition with the US.

NSICOP notes that while Russia has the capabilities to still practice foreign interference in Canada, it lacks intent to do so (NSICOP, 2024). The Committee now lists India as the second most significant foreign interference threat to Canada and its democratic processes (NSICOP). According to NSICOP, the country has actively targeted Canadian politicians, Indo-Canadian communities, and individuals, as well as ethnic media. Pakistan and Iran are also recognized by the committee as engaging in foreign interference, however, to a lesser extent than the PRC and India (NSICOP, 2024).

Further in NSICOP's report on foreign interference, it is alleged that several Members of Parliament (MPs) and senators helped foreign governments interfere in Canadian politics. Specifically, the report states that several MPs were "semi-witting or witting" participants in the

efforts of foreign states to interfere in Canadian politics (NSICOP, 2024, p. 67). The report states that China and India were involved in MP “collusion;” however, the names of specific MPs have not been released publicly.

To put these somewhat ambiguous claims in context, consider the curious case of Michael Chan, an Ontario Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) cabinet minister who, a decade ago, stood accused of having close ties to the Chinese government and who, according to internal CSIS reports at the time, compromised Canadian security interests as a result. In response, Chan wrote an open letter in the *Globe and Mail* stating: “Maintaining deep, meaningful connections with one’s culture, with one’s country of origin, is something millions of Canadians cherish. Our strong, personal ties around the world are a good thing – they are an integral part of the foundation of Canada and Ontario” (Carment, 2015). Underpinning Chan’s points is a basic reality that Canada’s security experts have yet to address: Canada can only grow and prosper if we acknowledge and understand that diaspora are not an instrument for political gain. Chan’s purported connections to the Chinese government became a useful political football then, just as such accusations against members of the Chinese community are now.

Going further, it has been rightfully argued that Canada’s intelligence and security institutions have contributed to anti-Chinese racism, which is detrimental to social cohesion at home (Carment, 2024). The electoral interference crisis, promulgated, in large part, by leaked information from Canada’s security community, has become so deeply politicised that members of Canada’s Chinese community including many notable politicians have been inaccurately and wrongly accused of being spies for China (Carment, 2024).

Threat escalation based on hyper vigilance is a recurring theme for Canada. Canada’s national security discourse generally depicts minor threats as existential, which are then blown

out of proportion by the mainstream media. In response, the resources Ottawa devotes to mitigate these “threats” are correspondingly inconsistent, and the policies enacted to combat them are often counterproductive. For example, during the Second World War, the GoC uprooted and dispossessed 23,000 Japanese Canadians due to allegations of spying for Japan, allegations that proved to be unfounded. Similar accusations wrecked the reputations of distinguished Canadians such as Carleton University professor, Maher Arar and diplomat Herbert Norman.

To be clear, Canada’s federal government (including its intelligence apparatus) carefully selects diaspora targets that fit nicely with its own foreign policy priorities. Why are people of Chinese origin repeatedly singled out? There are many MPs whose actions indicate they have loyalties to their homelands whether that be India, Israel or Ukraine. It is no secret that Canada’s slanted position on Palestinian statehood, the decision to close an embassy in Tehran or sending arms and loans to Ukraine are influenced by diaspora lobbying.

Nor is the manipulation of diaspora by foreign powers unique to a handful of countries (as we have noted above). Indeed, Canada often plays its own, often counterproductive, diaspora card (Carment & Samy, 2012; Carment et al., 2022b). It is a reality that diaspora manipulation is an essential part of any provincial or federal government’s playbook (CBC, 2016). However, as noted above, in the Canadian context, diaspora politics often produces a troubling mix of outcomes, giving rise to invidious comparison, special pleading, and behind-the-scenes lobbying (Carment & Bercuson, 2006). Politicians and members of Cabinet show favouritism towards some groups at the expense of others. This is evident in the creation of special diaspora initiatives with sizable budgets for some groups, but not others (Carment & Landry, 2016). It is also important to note that shifts in policies towards Russia, China, and India (and those

countries' reactions to these shifts) have occurred as successive Canadian governments increasingly play the diaspora card at home (Carment & Landry, 2016).

Irrespective of their standing in the HoC as minority or majority governments, both the Liberals and the Conservatives have, through the pursuit of a diaspora political agenda, opened the country to exploitation by other states seeking to disrupt Canada's internal affairs (Carment & Sadjed 2016; Nikolko & Carment, 2017). Previous Canadian governments understood, rightfully, that Canada's security rests on policies that advance the interests of many diverse groups, not just a few. Nevertheless, recent governments repeatedly support narrowly defined ethnic nationalism in conflicts abroad. Privileging the positions of one diaspora over another, invites these groups to bring disputes from their countries of origin into Canadian politics (as noted earlier. See in particular, Carment and Belo, 2019).

Such populism compromises the durability of traditional Canadian civic nationalism and risks further long-term damage to Canada's national identity (Carment & Bercuson, 2006; Carment & Nimijean 2021). *The uncertainty surrounding the long-term durability of that identity, arguably makes diaspora politics the most important Canadian international policy issue of the twenty-first century.*

The conditions in which diaspora politics hold sway are usually calculated behind the closed doors of the Prime Minister's Office (Carment et al., 2022a,b). Policies are chosen because they are thought to generate the greatest support for the sitting government. The outcomes of these policies, however, can play out in the public sphere because federal ridings are often contested by representatives of a targeted ethnic group.

Such machinations create problems of satisfying a domestic constituency while simultaneously maintaining good relations internationally with Canada's allies, trading partners,

and aid recipients. Consider, for example, the recognition of the Armenian genocide (to Turkey's great displeasure); severing relations with Iran (much to the chagrin of the Iranian business community in Canada); support for "the Republic of" Macedonia (to Greece's annoyance); support for Kosovo's independence (stimulating renewed conflict in the Balkans) and outreach to Canadian Tamils (to Sri Lanka's constant irritation). Canada's confrontational rhetoric on Iran, the purpose of which is to appease a Jewish political base, led ultimately to the closure of Canada's embassy in Tehran; a reckless decision that dramatically limited Canada's influence in the Middle East (Carment & Landry, 2016).

Consider the circumstances surrounding a Conservative private Member's bill to recognize April 30th as a national day commemorating the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada after the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese communist forces. The bill provoked Vietnam's ambassador to Canada, To Anh Dung, to respond: "If passed, this bill will have an adverse impact on the growing bilateral relations between our two countries. Despite claims of being non-political, this bill clearly incites national hatred and division, not unity" (Carment & Landry, 2016).

Jason Kenney, then Minister of Immigration, once stated that Canada acted against its own interests in listing the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist organization. Kenney made this announcement at a meeting of Tamil Canadians to a closed ethnic press, demonstrating not only the controversy such a statement would create in the mainstream media, but also the kind of narrow casting of policy choices that is a crucial part of the diaspora politics playbook. It was subsequently revealed that remnants of the Tamil separatist movement in Canada had worked their way into the Conservative Party (CPC) apparatus (Carment & Landry, 2016).



To be clear, in Canadian politics, electoral size, while important, is not the ultimate determinant of an effective and influential diaspora community. As we point out above, positionality and alignment determine diaspora influence and effectiveness (Carment & Calleja 2018; Carment et al., 2022b). Some groups are simply better organized, more cohesive, and have access to greater resources than others, generating an unevenness in outcomes and perceptions of favouritism. There is the “black box” of influence-peddling and lobbying, and the largely undocumented impact that certain groups have regarding courting individual MPs, influencing constituency dynamics, and shaping the selection of candidates to run for elections.

### *Israel*

While the manipulation of diaspora communities to meet political ends is arguably more extensive than ever before in Canadian history, so too are efforts by diaspora groups to impose their particular interests on Canada’s international policy agenda. This “push” side of diaspora politics poses new challenges, especially since the rise of cheap and ubiquitous telecommunications, social media, instantaneous money transfer, and air travel. These developments coupled with financial liberalization, have enabled members of Canada’s diaspora communities to connect with their homelands instantaneously (Carment et al., 2022b) These new ways of communicating have created opportunities for growth and investment, but also open old wounds that can prove hard to heal.

One country increasingly accused of being involved in foreign interference in Canada is Israel. In June 2024, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said it was aware of a coordinated disinformation campaign that was created to spread Islamophobia and inaccurate information regarding the war on Gaza (Global News, 2024).

While the GoC did not specify that the Government of Israel was behind the spread of misinformation, Haaretz, a prominent Israeli newspaper, reported that the Government of Israel was behind a large-scale influence campaign targeting politicians in Canada and the US. The campaign was an attempt to sway public opinion condemning the country's conduct in Gaza and the West Bank (Global News, 2024). It involved the creation of multiple fake social media accounts suggesting that Canadian Muslims are a threat to western values.

The campaign utilized Artificial Intelligence (AI) to alter images of individuals at protests supporting Palestine; one photo was digitally edited to portray some individuals to be holding a banner that read "Shariah for Canada." The researchers note that at least 50 fake accounts on Facebook and 100 on X had been created to support the campaign and spread anti-Muslim narratives, however, the Government of Israel continues to deny any involvement (Robertson, 2024).

In earlier cases involving Israeli interference, two respected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) located in the Middle East, Mada Al-Carmal and Kairos International, were victims of foreign meddling and diaspora manipulation. The 2010 decision by the government-funded International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to cut more than \$700,000 in grant money to Mada Al-Carmel fueled tensions with Palestinians and weakened Canada's influence in the Middle East. The NGO contested the cut in court.

It was later revealed that an Israeli group, NGO Monitor, had approached the Conservatives with concerns prior to the government's decision. Observers noted that, afterwards, David Malone, then president of the IDRC, believed that the Crown corporation had little choice but to cut Mada al-Carmal's funding. This outcome was similar to the fate that befell Canada's International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD- later

“Rights and Democracy” see Cameron et al., 2023). The former Minister of International Cooperation, Bev Oda’s intervention to cancel some \$7 million worth of funding to Kairos was the result of similar interference (Carment & Landry, 2016).

### *Russia and Ukraine*

Outside of Russian election interference, there are other examples of the Kremlin and its proxies targeting Canada and Canadian leadership. In response, the GoC has leaned on its Ukrainian diaspora to generate maximum political outcomes for the incumbent federal government (Carment & Belo, 2022a). Prior to becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, wrote an article in praise of Ukraine’s “honest thieves.” In her view, which was shared by members of the CPC, the only leaders capable of governing Ukraine were the wealthy, internationally connected Ukrainian oligarchs since they possessed “the money, institutional support, networks and even the managerial skills to step up to that challenge” (Freeland, 2014).

Freeland quickly became a favourite of conservative mainstream media, diaspora groups, and political pundits and think tanks at home and abroad including the Macdonald-Laurier Institute who selected her as their policy maker of the year. In supporting Ukraine’s war efforts, Freeland has held three distinct positions including Minister of Finance, Deputy Prime Minister, and leadership of the Ukraine file. In her speech to the HoC concerning the release of the 2022 Federal Budget, Freeland implicitly endorsed regime change in Russia, noting that “Putin’s assault has been so vicious that we all now understand that the world’s democracies — including our own — can be safe only once the Russian tyrant and his armies are entirely vanquished” (Foreign Policy Report Card, 2022).

Further, in a detailed section of the budget outlining how Canada would support Ukraine directly, Freeland advanced a controversial and misguided policy to support “the ability of the

Minister of Foreign Affairs to cause the forfeiture and disposal of assets held by sanctioned individuals and entities” (House of Commons, 2024). Just prior to war onset in February 2022, former Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, was criticized for profiting from the war and for his involvement in the illegal arms trade, until Freeland intervened personally to prevent his arrest from going to trial.

Today’s confrontation between Russia and Canada has reached the point where Russia has banned Prime Minister Trudeau, many Canadian parliamentarians. Faculty from some Canadian universities face the possibility of arrest should they enter the country. As a result Canada’s diplomatic reach and influence over Russia has diminished considerably with time, as the ideology and preferences of various politicians, representatives of think tanks and academics create a path dependent approach towards confrontation. That approach has proven to be both immune to criticism and open-ended (Carment & Belo, 2022 a,b).

More recently echoing Minister Freeland, Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly raised the possibility of regime change in Moscow noting: “We’re able to see how much we’re isolating the Russian regime right now — because we need to do so economically, politically and diplomatically — and what are the impacts also on society, and how much we’re seeing potential regime change in Russia.” She said regime change is the point of applying sanctions and pursuing accountability for alleged war crimes (Carment, 2023).

However, as evidence from US election interference over many decades shows, regime change rarely succeeds as a tool of foreign policy. For example, according to recent research, of 66 US-led regime change operations during the Cold War, 40 failed to overthrow the targeted leader. When regime change operations are successful, the new regime is in fact more likely to engage in a militarised dispute with the party that helped bring them to power. Furthermore,

following regime changes, mass killings and civil war become more probable, while democratisation become less probable (O'Rourke, 2016).

The role of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, specifically its organized civil society actors, are crucial to understanding Canada's determined opposition to resolving this war. Unfortunately, the lack of understanding surrounding the causes of the war, its impact and Russian strategy is due to the lopsided manner in which information reaches the public with much of it filtered through the lens of just a handful of media outlets (Carment and Belo, 2022b). The deliberate suppression of the actual costs of Canada's commitment has created a surreal policy debate, where only occasional fact-based analysis contradicting Canada's strategy is made available for public consumption (Carment & Belo, 2022 a,b,c).

Canada has also pursued so called "direct diplomacy" strategies with the people of Russia (as well as citizens in Iran). While not quite as contentious as ongoing US efforts to disrupt internal politics in Cuba and Venezuela, the intent of stimulating social change remains the same (Carment & Sadjed, 2016; Guardian, 2014; Carment & Belo, 2022b).

To be sure, diaspora pandering in Canada transcends those of Ukrainian descent as many Canadians of East European heritage are long prominent in Canadian politics. However, as has been argued elsewhere, (Carment & Landry, 2016; Carment, 2015; Carment & Nikolko, 2017; Carment et al., 2022a) this particular diaspora relationship resonates more now than ever before.

Canada's position toward Russia, under former PM Stephen Harper provides ample evidence to support the idea of ideological convergence between diasporic leaders and political agendas. Under the Prime Minister's leadership, the Conservatives staked out their position domestically, as a government opposed to diplomatic engagement with Putin. Indeed, the Conservatives seized every opportunity to portray Russia as expansionist and unpredictable

which in turn helped build support for the party among many “victims of communism,” who had fled the country to Canada. Ukraine would be the most prominent among these perpetual victims that suffered, first under the Soviets then under Russia (Carment et al., 2022a).

The Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) has a long history of organizing events, promoting research and seeking international support in recognition of the 1932 Holodomor or “death by starvation.” In 2008, the Harper government brought to conclusion the passage of a private Member’s bill defining the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people perpetrated by the Soviet Union. The subsequent victimization narrative quickly became a central part of Canadian-Ukrainian discourse and ultimately a core part of Harper’s policy towards Russia.

When Harper visited Kiev or when dignitaries from Ukraine came to Ottawa he would repeat a death toll that far exceeds estimates from many experts in Canada and elsewhere (Carment et al., 2022a). That close alignment between members of the diaspora and the government, in generating policy choices for Canada without proper vetting and due diligence would prove to be disastrous when a Ukrainian World War II veteran and former member of the Nazi party was given privileged access to and public recognition in the HoC.

For Canada, a key focal point of efforts to influence Russian politics has been Ukraine’s Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In 2007, Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) supported the dispatch of academic David Carment to lead a team of UNDP trainers and analysts to Simferopol and Yalta. There, the objective was to engage all relevant social and political stakeholders in Crimea, including leaders of religious and ethnic minorities, elected officials and leading civil society organisations, in a dialogue on the region’s social, political and economic future. Since the process was formally sanctioned by Crimea’s religious and

political leaders, the goal was to directly influence the public service and to work with them to design a programme that would make better use of analysis for informed and balanced decision making. The working assumption was that a fact based, analytical approach would not only generate trust, which was badly lacking in this deeply divided society, it would be the essential back bone to a responsible government that relies on evidence based policy-making (Carment & Nikolko, 2016).

At the time, despite long-standing international support, Crimea's parliament was failing to meet its responsibilities of improving the socio-economic conditions of the population, and working to sustain positive collaborative experiences between different ethnic groups. Its leaders possessed only a limited amount of interest in developing shared responsibility through education and minority language rights, and mechanisms for dialogue and consensus-building. Despite these pressing challenges and ongoing alienation of Crimea's minority groups, the GoC under Stephen Harper chose to redirect its funding, focusing instead on small and medium business development and food security elsewhere in Ukraine. Funding for the Crimea governance initiative wound down a few years later. Gains in developing dialogue and trust-building, though small, would go unrealized. Canada's diplomatic reach into the region was significantly diminished to the point that it carried no influence there after 2014.

Ultimately, any direct diplomatic strategy, such as the one on Crimea, illustrated above must be sensitive to the possibility that its actions – especially when incomplete or inadequate - may in reality hasten and escalate conflict. For example, Western powers who believe that digital diplomacy focused on shaping the opinions and attitudes of ordinary persons is a neutral strategy, should think about the unintended effects their social media efforts produce. In the Ukraine context where digital diplomacy is most prominent alongside the shipment of arms to

Kiev, Western powers are supporting the information backdrop, or propaganda, as if they have made a formal declaration of war to support Ukraine's fight against Russia. In this context, social media platforms are not neutral sources of information, but are clearly biased in favour of Ukraine's struggle, overlooking the misinformation and disinformation that casts Russia and, its allies such as China, in an unfavourable light. Even Western "open-source intelligence" based on this kind of social media is partial to Ukraine's war effort (Carment et al., 2022a, Carment & Belo 2022, a,b).

More broadly, Canada's digital diplomacy endeavours are often guided by what our allies do, or ask us to do, even when those actions have negative impacts on our collective well-being. For example, in response to Canada's lopsided social media campaigns which echo those from Europe and the US, Russia has successfully capitalized on some of these more obvious biases in the media to undermine and weaken support for the Trudeau government. During the Freedom Convoy, the Kremlin purportedly funded a propaganda outlet that produced large volumes of information on the event; this included sending correspondents to interview individuals involved in the convoy (Orr, 2023). Despite being a Russian news outlet, the outlet's coverage is said to have been widely shared among Convoy supporters and played a role in generating sympathy and support for the protests (Orr, 2023).

In a similar vein, a member of the FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force has suggested that recent Russian foreign influence efforts are not focused on a specific election result, but instead are focused on creating "chaos and distrust" abroad by making it difficult to differentiate between what is fact and what is not (Gilmore, 2022). In truth, scepticism about the value of mainstream media as a trustworthy source of information is increasing for unrelated reasons (Carment & Nimijean 2021).



When a Russian news network, Sputnik, wrote an article focusing on “Wexit,” an Alberta secession movement; some experts believed that it was likely commissioned by the Kremlin (this is not to say Western alienation is entirely drive by external forces). Rather, Russia purportedly aims to amplify so called “fringe” voices, in order to create the perception that an idea is more greatly supported than it actually is. In the long-run, this could weaken democratic processes if the response from Canada is to clamp down on freedom of expression (Carment & Belo, 2018; Laing, 2019; Cameron, Gillies & Carment, 2023; Carment & Nimijean 2021).

If there is a clear trend in the Kremlin manipulating social media to highlight opposition to Canadian government policies, it is because we are engaged in a full-on proxy war with Russia involving the single largest arms push since World War II (Carment & Belo, 2022a,b,c). Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi from Simon Fraser University suggests that Russian affiliated actors normally align themselves with the far-right in Canada by attacking minorities, including Muslims and LGBTQ+ communities (Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, 2024) which in turn can help push moderate “big L” liberals into a position of not only supporting Ukraine but, more importantly, punishing Russia.

However, drawing out false or misleading associations between individual beliefs about the war in Ukraine and collective expressions of extremism is a form of assumption creep, involving faulty logic regarding individual positions and beliefs. “Assumption creep” refers to taking a real position someone holds, then assuming the person believes a more sinister, secret thing that they are not disclosing, and attacking them on their secret undisclosed position they do not even hold.

In the Canadian context, deliberate efforts to discredit individuals who oppose military aid to Ukraine or support a negotiated solution to the conflict comes in three forms: 1) Large

sample analyses of social media suggesting these people are misguided, easily duped, Putin's "useful idiots" and/or closely associated with uncritical conservatism(Global News, 2022); 2) Surveys and polls that attempt to align individual political beliefs with support for negotiation or skepticism about the Liberal government's war efforts (New York Times, 2023). and; 3) More frequently on social media, organised anonymous ad hominem attacks on those who endorse a negotiated settlement in an effort to silence these people. By associating a broad range of ordinary Canadians with "sinister" Russian disinformation campaigns, the goal is to purposely limit space for legitimate debate and criticism of bad, ineffective and counterproductive policies (Carment & Belo 2022a,c). These attacks, especially in personalised ad hominem form are not unique to the Russia-Ukraine war. They are appearing more frequently in regards to the war on Gaza. All three strategies are important, if not fundamental, components of Western propaganda and war fighting in the "grey zone" (Carment & Belo, 2018).

### *India*

Aside from foreign interference in election campaigns, as well as accusations of working with MPs, there is little public information regarding specific examples of India's foreign interference in Canada. Much of India's interference focuses on Canada's diaspora. The Foreign Interference Commission (2024) states that India takes interest in Canada due to its large South Asian communities. The Government of India believes that some Indo-Canadian communities are contributing to an "anti-India" sentiment and are a threat to the national security of India.

For example, during a 2012 visit to India, PM Harper was asked by the Indian government to denounce Sikh aspirations for a separate state, something he would not do. Instead, he stated: "The government of Canada, and I believe the vast majority of Canadian people, including the vast majority of Indo-Canadians, have no desire to see the revival of old

hostilities in this great country.” He also noted that Sikh advocacy for a separate state of Khalistan is not illegal in Canada. His foreign minister at the time, John Baird, was more unequivocal: Canada’s Conservative government would do “everything it [could] possibly do, under the law, to combat radical extremism.” Baird’s statement was poorly received in the Sikh community (Carment & Landry, 2016).

Not surprisingly, India views anyone engaged in Khalistan separatism as a threat to national security (given the assassination of PM Indira Ghandi for example). India has accused Canada of supporting the separatist movement, stating that the LPC and other Canadian political parties have “given these kinds of extremism, separatism, advocates of violence a certain legitimacy, in the name of free speech” (Robertson, 2024). As stated in the Foreign Interference Commission, India does not distinguish between pro-Khalistan political advocacy and separatist violent extremism; this lack of distinction may help explain why India has taken an interest in taking matters into its own hands (Foreign Interference Commission, 2024).

According to the Foreign Interference Commission “Indian officials in Canada have increasingly relied on Canadian and Canada-based proxies and the contacts in their networks to conduct foreign interference-related activities... proxies liaise and work with Indian intelligence officials in India and Canada” (Foreign Interference Commission, 2024, p.3). Earlier in 2023, PM Trudeau accused the Government of India of being involved in the murder of a Canadian Sikh leader; stating that there was reason to believe that agents of the Indian government orchestrated the killing. While three men have since been arrested for first-degree murder, as well as conspiracy to commit murder, investigations into whether the individuals have connections to the Government of India are ongoing at this time (Murphy, 2024).

In 2020, it was reported that India's intelligence agencies attempted to use both money and disinformation to influence Canadian politicians to support Indian government officials. An individual, who was the editor-in-chief of an Indian newspaper, allegedly met with Indian intelligence more than 25 times over six years; he was asked to act as an "unofficial lobbyist or diplomat," as well as to "convince politicians that funding from Canada was being sent to Pakistan to support terrorism" (Bell, 2020).

In addition, there have been multiple Indian disinformation campaigns intended to embarrass Canadian officials focused specifically on PM Justin Trudeau (though some of these are the LPC's "own goals." See: Foreign Policy Report Card 2019). In an extreme case, in September 2023, a former Indian diplomat made comments that the PM's plane was full of cocaine during a G20 meeting in New Delhi (Toronto Sun, 2023, see also criticism of Trudeau's visit to India – Foreign Policy Card 2019).

### *Saudi Arabia*

Information relating to Saudi Arabian foreign interference in Canada is quite limited. In a Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics meeting, Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi, Director of the Disinformation Project at Simon Fraser University, found that Saudi Arabian actors were active in producing disinformation campaigns directed at Canadian politicians; they often targeted PM Trudeau due to the "presence and activities of some critical human rights activists in Canada" (2024). A CBC report from 2019 claimed that an anonymous source revealed to them that intelligence services were monitoring efforts by Saudi Arabia to influence the 2019 Canadian general election, the country was listed along with Pakistan, Iran and Venezuela (Tunney & Burke, 2019). When the plight of female Saudi activists was brought to the attention of the Saudi government, the consequences for Canada were quite dire. Saudi

Arabia ordered the withdrawal all of Saudi university students from Canada (Carment & Nimijean, 2021).

Saudi Arabian citizens who seek refuge in Canada often experience transnational repression. The country has utilized different methods to continue to terrorize its citizens, even when they are outside Saudi borders. For instance, Saudi Arabia has utilized “remote access cyber espionage” against activists within Canada. One example of such is the case of Omar Abdulaziz. Abdulaziz is a Saudi Arabian dissident who came to Canada in 2014 after fleeing Saudi Arabia for criticizing the country’s government.

Upon his arrival in Canada, Abdulaziz became friends with Jamal Khashoggi. Shortly prior to Khashoggi’s assassination in 2008, Abdulaziz discovered that his cell phone had been compromised by Pegasus Spyware, a tool developed by an Israeli cyber-intelligence company. Abdulaziz believes his conversations with Khashoggi were monitored and likely had a role in the activist’s death (Lamensch, 2024).

It is believed that Saudi Arabia has also tried to physically harm Saudi Arabian dissidents within Canada. For instance, Saad Aljabri, a former Saudi intelligence official fled to Canada in 2007. In August 2020, in a US district court filed lawsuit, Aljabri alleges that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman sent mercenaries to Canada in order to assassinate him. The lawsuit states that the plan did not succeed, as Canadian border agents refused to allow the Saudi men to enter the country after they allegedly lied about knowing each other (Freedom House, 2022).

### *Iran*

The NSICOP report on foreign interference states that Iran has engaged in “episodic foreign interference directed towards suppressing dissidents and critics in Canada,” specifically making mention of transnational repression activities (2024, p. 59). The report states that the

country has monitored and repressed ethnocultural communities (2024). A Global News report lacking substantive details and echoing the threat inflation rhetoric noted earlier, states that members of the Iranian diaspora, often receive threats from agents of the Islamic Republic. The article asserts that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of potentially dangerous “regime connected officials on Canadian soil” (Mojtahedi & Leffler, 2023).

Previously in 2022, PM Trudeau averred that the GoC was monitoring concerns regarding Iran issuing death threats against Canadians. Further, while it is believed that Iran did not interfere in the 2019 or 2021 elections, a study by Simon Fraser University claims that the country did attempt to spread disinformation on Twitter in the 2015 election; the study found that Iranian internet “trolls” had “amplified a fake story that Stephen Harper was actually a CIA plant who couldn’t be “trusted” (Weichel, 2021). The study suggests that Iran was pro-Trudeau, as they saw the Liberal government as being more likely to foster a positive relationship with Iran due to its positive stance on immigration, unlike the Conservatives. It is unknown whether the interference had any impact on the election results (Weichel, 2021).

Iran is accused of transnational repression, specifically targeting dissidents, through intimidation tactics such as blackmailing, as well as, through threats to their families, in order to attempt to silence them (Juneau, 2024). Maryam Shafipour, an Iranian who fled the country to Canada, is one example of an Iranian national who has been threatened since fleeing to Canada. Specifically, Shafipour, who was jailed in Tehran prison prior to fleeing to Canada, states that her family in Iran has been continuously threatened by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. Unfortunately, the decision to withdraw our embassy staff from Tehran means there is little of substance that Canada can do to influence Iran directly.

Disengagement carries a heavy cost. For example, the American drone that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, occurred on Iraqi soil without their consent, a country where the US has spent trillions of dollars with limited positive effect. Nine other people were killed, including several Iraqis. Caught off guard by the drone assassination, Canada was forced to withdraw its training forces in Iraq as a result.

In regards to matters of foreign interference, the rationale for killing Soleimani raises a number of problems. The US claimed it was a pre-emptive attack to protect American lives. The justification for pre-emption is one advanced by Israel, a pioneer in using drones against targets in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Pre-emption is typically justified because of an “imminent” threat. In killing Soleimani, the Trump administration furnished no evidence to that effect.

This is quite extraordinary. The US admitted to assassinating an official of a government that it is not actually at war with, citing intelligence that we will, of course, see no evidence for. Soleimani’s killing quadrupled the numbers of enemies America’s allies now face. America is not only in conflict with Iran, but its proxies operating in neighbouring states, as well as ISIS and various militias within Iraq and Lebanon.

For Canada, the fallout from Soleimani’s assassination is significant for several reasons. As a contributor to a training mission in Iraq, Canada deployed 500 military personnel to Iraq and throughout the region. Soleimani’s assassination put Canadian soldiers and diplomats lives at risk. More importantly, with escalation between Israel, Iran and the US now underway, lines have been drawn in ways that Canada has no significant role to play. Iraqi militias continue to target US bases. Should Canadian forces be asked to help the US in its current war against Iran that would be a significant shift in policy for the Trudeau government. Our mission in Iraq, for example, was intended to train and equip the Iraq and Kurdish security forces to withstand the

resurgence of the Islamic State. But its underlying purpose has always lacked clarity and direction.

If anything, by following the US lockstep on its Middle East agenda, Canada is worse off through deeper and closer integration with the US military mindset. This is because the US has far more special forces deployed abroad than it does diplomats. Its kinetically driven foreign policy is akin to a very large hammer in search of nails (Carment and Belo, 2021b) Absent any efforts to reinvigorate diplomacy and PM Trudeau’s aspirations to strengthen a rules-based international order look very, very weak (Carment & Belo, 2020a; Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022).

### *China*

Beyond the diaspora linkages examined earlier, Canada-China relations have been marked by long standing efforts to enhance trade through formal channels with significant changes along the way. For example, the Harper government began its relationship with China through formal negotiations. However, after realizing that “people to people links across the Pacific” presented an electoral advantage, the Conservatives quickly reversed course. Indeed, as Jason Kenney proudly observed, in 2011, the Conservatives fielded more Chinese Canadian electoral candidates than any other party. Kenney also personally advocated that the government issue an apology for the old Chinese head tax, which had extensively limited Chinese immigration and family unification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1885–1923); spear-headed the Community Historical Recognition Program – a \$13.5 million project to celebrate and commemorate historical Canadian achievements that greatly benefitted Chinese communities in Vancouver and Toronto; and increased his number of carefully planned appearances in the Chinese community on culturally significant holidays (Carment & Landry, 2016).



Since then, and up until recently, Canada-China relations in commerce, trade and investment were driven by powerful mutual interests, creating opportunities for mutual gain and growth. Canada's commitment to strengthening ties with China was clearly evident well before the Liberals came to power in 2015. However, it was the Liberal government that committed fully to negotiating a trade deal with China. For example, the main priority in Chrystia Freeland's mandate letter as Minister of Foreign Affairs, was to focus on "expanding trade with large fast-growing markets, including China and India, and deepening our trade links with traditional partners." The letter was extraordinary in that it instructed Freeland to develop a targeted strategy to promote trade and investment with emerging markets – "with particular attention to China [and India]" (Foreign Policy Report Card 2022, Carment Macdonald & Paltiel 2022 – see specifically chapters by Dade and Chin).

Today however, pressed, in part, by hard-line Conservative opposition that is more sympathetic to US foreign policy objectives, building constructive relations with China has become increasingly difficult. Coupled with an unwillingness to make public, tough decisions, the Liberal government has, like administrations before it, tried to avoid the political fallout generated by the Sino-American rivalry.

Is Canada's delinking from China a result of US influence and pressure? Certainly. Has the US interfered in Canada in realising that outcome? That is difficult to say because the dominant pro-US agenda narrative in Canada is that espoused by members of our defence and security community. There is little doubt that this community shares a world view similar to that of US administrations. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has repeatedly emphasised the protection of American jobs, depicting China as a long-term geopolitical rival capable of achieving international hegemony (Carment, Macdonald & Paltiel, 2022)

Joe Biden's ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, has described China as an "existential threat." In turn, Canada's former Chief of Defence Staff, Wayne Eyre, described China as the biggest cyber threat to Canada. America's answer and presumably Canada's too, according to Blinken, must be backed by preserving "the world's most powerful armed forces." That view has broad bi-partisan support across all levels of government. Canada is now being pressured to spend more on defence to counter the China "threat."

What exactly is that threat? China has been accused of playing a role in election foreign interference, as well as, engaging directly with Canadian MPs (as noted above). The latter actions may be more influence than interference. Outside such activities, China has also issued several disinformation campaigns targeting Trudeau and other Canadian politicians who oppose strengthening relations with China. In 2023, it was reported that China issued a "spamouflage" campaign that used an abundance of online posts to target Canadian politicians; this featured a bot network that left thousands of comments on the social media platforms of prominent Canadian politicians and used "deep-fake" videos to target the individuals (BBC, 2023).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is also accused of targeting diaspora communities with intimidation campaigns. Some of these claims have not withstood scrutiny (Osman, 2024). The CCP has been known to take advantage of Chinese social media, such as WeChat, which is used by many Chinese Canadians, to target diaspora populations though without much impact on political outcomes and an increase in anti-Chinese racism (Kelter, 2023).

## **The Way Forward for Canada**

In the section below we identify four areas where Canada should invest in developing a coherent strategy regarding foreign influence and interference.

### *1) Support Dissidents Constructively*

One common element of foreign interference is transnational repression, which can be defined as “states implanting repressive policies to silence or coerce nationals located outside their territorial borders” (Al-Jizawi et al., 2022). In its 2021 and 2022 reports focusing on transnational repression, Freedom House discusses how the trend of transnational repression continues to rise and become a larger issue due to authoritarian regimes wanting to suppress any opposition (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021). However, despite the large threat that this poses, Canadian efforts to reduce it have been historically limited. There are only a handful of Canadian-based initiatives focused on protecting exiles who have sought refuge in Canada: the Voices in Exile Project, the Resilient Societies Project and the Writers in Exile project. The Voices in Exile project is based at the University of Ottawa and has the goal of bringing awareness and recognition to activists in exile within Canada by highlighting their work. The project’s website includes profiles on the various exiled individuals, who were forced to flee their home countries due to persecution, and therefore unable to continue their activism (Voices in Exile, n.d.).

The project highlights the work of activists from many countries on topics such as democracy, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights and refugee rights. In doing so, it allows the voices of dissidents to be heard, while simultaneously bringing attention to the global issue of censorship (Voices in Exile, n.d.). The platform creates a space where individuals can share the work that they were once prohibited from sharing in their home countries. Overall, the project provides a

population that is often underestimated with a sense of agency, demonstrating their potential, and allowing them to have a voice on a large uncensored platform.

A second project that provides support to exiled activists is the Resilient Societies project. The project is managed by Cooperation Canada, a group dedicated to collaborating with organizations, governments and individuals in order to develop solutions to some of the world's current challenges such as human rights abuses and authoritarianism (Cooperation Canada, n.d.). Cooperation Canada describes Resilient Societies as an “activists-hub providing support and safe spaces for grassroots networks of human rights defenders, democracy and civil society activists” (Cooperation Canada, n.d.). The project, much like the Voices in Exile project, aims to enhance the voice of human rights defenders and dissidents in exile through support for democratic values and principles (Cooperation Canada, n.d.).

Lastly, a third project focusing on supporting exiled individuals in Canada is the Writers in Exile Program, which was created by PEN Canada. Similar to the “Scholars at Risk” initiative, the project was created to provide support and assistance to “writers, journalists, editors, translators, essayists and playwrights” (PEN, n.d.), who had to flee their countries due to a lack of freedom of expression and an inability to continue their work. The program works with the individuals to improve their professional skills through interaction with a community of like-minded writers (PEN, n.d.). Despite the large threat posed by transnational repression, there does not seem to be many large projects supporting individuals in exile in Canada with details available in the public sphere. There also does not seem to be any programs for exiled activists that are funded by the GoC.

## *2) Strengthen Alternative Media and Platforms*

Recently, digital democracy projects have flourished around the globe, with many platforms being developed in the face of a crisis during a period of declining trust in mainstream media and politicians and their institutions. For instance, Tsai et al. (2024) analyze the platform Polis, which they describe as a public opinion platform that gives individuals an overview of the spectrums of opinion around different contested discussion topics. The platform allows the government to pose the public policy questions. The platform then “uses statistical summarization to provide graphical feedback on what the population as a whole believes or desires” (Tsai et al., 2024, P.10). Polis has been used in various different contexts to generate consensus on different issues including on climate issues in Austria, to facilitate the development of government policy in New Zealand and to assist in developing the platform of a political party in Germany (Tsai et al., 2024).

Lironi (2018) summarizes a variety of digital tools being used to foster democratic processes by both governments and NGOs in Europe. Lironi (2018) discusses how former mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, created an interactive platform for Parisian citizens to vote on what projects the government should invest in. The platform, called Paris Budget Participatif, became an official platform that allowed Parisian citizens to vote on how five percent of the city’s budget should be spent between 2014 to 2020, totalling 500 million euros. In Latvia, an NGO created an online platform called ManaBalss.lv. The platform allows Latvians to “propose, submit and sign legislative initiatives to improve policies at both the national and municipal level” (Lironi, 2018, P.2).

Simon et al., (2017) also discusses several e-democracy platforms, one of which was VTaiwan. VTaiwan was developed by a group of activists in Taiwan in 2014. It can be described

as a consultation process that brings together a variety of stakeholders for online and offline activities with the aim “to encourage participants to achieve a ‘rough consensus on specific issues” (Simon et al., 2017, P29). Overall, there have been a variety of platforms developed with the goal of promoting digital and direct democracy through deepened participation in political affairs as well as improved transparency by governments.

3) *Create a Canadian foreign influence, lobbying and interference database*

Ben Freeman, Director of the Democratizing Foreign Policy Program, at the Quincy Institute, publishes extensively on the topic of foreign influence by various threat actors in the US. Countries of focus in his articles include Ukraine, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In several of his articles, Freeman discusses how foreign countries utilize lobbying to gain support from policymakers. Ukraine, Israel and Saudi Arabia vie for influence in Washington, but other countries and conflicts matter too (such as Ethiopia). Freeman (2023) shows how both Azerbaijan and Armenia have utilized lobbying in the US to attempt to persuade policymakers to support their country in the war. For instance, the government of Azerbaijan has spent \$7 million on lobbying and public relations firms registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) since the year 2015. This has helped Azerbaijan to avoid criticism on its actions during the Nagorno-Karabakh war and secure millions of dollars in assistance. Importantly, since these firms were registered under FARA, and operations were not done covertly, this cannot be described as foreign interference, but rather foreign influence. However, Azerbaijan has also engaged in illegal foreign interference activities in the US and Europe such as through illegal money laundering schemes and so called “caviar diplomacy,” which refers to the country providing illegal bribes to European officials (Freeman, 2023, p.4).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, Freeman (2024) discusses how some firms, including Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Company, failed to register under the FARA as agents of the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF). Saudi PIF has attempted to dismiss their actions as being solely economic investments, therefore not requiring FARA registration. Unlike the actions of Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, the actions of Saudi Arabia constitute illegal foreign interference due to the failure of the PIF to register several of its consultants under the required legislation. Freeman emphasizes that this can send a message that America's "friends" can interfere in US politics (Freeman, 2024).

It is evident that the US has a double standard regarding which countries are allowed to interfere in domestic US affairs versus those that are not. Freeman (2023) discusses how Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE continue to engage in illegal influence operations in the US, but have received little backlash, while China and Russia are constantly criticized for similar actions.

Another relevant example of such is the US treatment of Israeli disinformation campaigns. Recently, it is alleged that 128 members of Congress were targeted by an influence operation conducted by Israel to spread pro-Israel military content on social media amid the ongoing war in Gaza. The campaign involved around 600 fake social media profiles seemingly issuing support for Israel's military actions and involved also criticizing Palestinian right groups, and dismissing alleged human rights violations committed by Israel military forces.

It was reported by the New York Times that the operation was supported by the Israeli government; however, the Israeli Ministry for Diaspora Affairs denies any involvement in the operation (Gedeon & Miller, 2024). In response to the allegations, in a written letter, thirty civil society organisations have called on the Biden administration to begin an investigation into the troubling reports. That letter notes that the US has expressed concern and has responded when

other countries were found to be conducting similar influence operations (NIAC Action, 2024). Despite, the large-scale reporting on the influence operations, the US government has not made any commitment to investigate the allegations further and has not committed to responding in a given way to the acts.

American-based organisations have attempted to track influence and interference activities that have taken place both within American borders, as well as abroad. Freeman is responsible for the creation of a “Foreign Influence Database.” The database tracked propaganda created and distributed by foreign individuals. Previously, such information was largely unavailable. The database information came from “materials filed by lobbying and public relations firms working on behalf of foreign entities in the United States” (Useful Databases and other resources for conducting oversight, n.d.). Specifically, the database identifies foreign agents that were involved in political activities on behalf of a foreign principle and that were registered under FARA. The database is comprised of information filed between the years 2009 and 2012, but unfortunately is no longer accessible online.

In addition to the Foreign Influence Database discussed above, there are currently several other foreign influence trackers available on the internet. For instance, Open Secrets is a research group that “tracks money in US politics and its effects on elections and public policy” (Open Secrets, n.d.). On their website, there is a collection of lobbying data and analysis that demonstrates how much money different countries have spent lobbying in the US in any given year going back to 2016. The website’s Foreign Lobby Watch uses reports that foreign agents are required to file under the FARA with the Department of Justice to calculate a country’s total spending on lobbying for a given year (Foreign Lobby Watch, n.d.). Domestic lobbying in the US is more explicitly monitored through, for example, campaign donations (AIPAC’s donations



are considerable in shaping electoral outcomes) (Palmer & Carment, 2023). As Palmer and Carment (2023) show, this concentration of wealth in support of political campaigns not only skews foreign policy choices, it also undermines the democratic process irrevocably.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, Canada has no similar foreign influence or interference tracker, let alone a carefully designed tool that measures the impact of campaign funding and lobbying on foreign policy choices. The development of such trackers may be difficult. Tracking foreign influence in the US is simplified by the FARA, which requires foreign agents to declare their relationships with foreign principles, Canada does not have a similar registry currently in place. In addition to the US, Australia also has a similar registry, which goes by the name of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act (FITS) and the UK has announced plans to introduce a similar registry (Government of Canada, 2021).

The potential is there to reduce foreign interference and influence, but only if such trackers identify the actions of both allies and adversaries, and the diaspora that are mobilised to support those actions. At the very least, such a database would make foreign relationships more public and make it more difficult for foreign agents to act covertly.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of a foreign agency registry, it is difficult to develop similar tracker tools for foreign influence that exist in other countries. The US trackers use FARA filings to track the presence of foreign actors' lobbying. Without such a registry, tracking in Canada is nearly impossible for a government agency. Foreign interference is even harder to track, while numerous cases are exposed in the media eventually, there are many cases of foreign interference that go unnoticed and unpunished. A tracker could summarize foreign interference

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<sup>3</sup> The authors find that democratic decline is result of three processes: The growth of a rent-seeking political class, the diminished political autonomy of elected leaders and elite capture. Canada is not immune to all three forces including political interference in the work of the civil service.

cases that have been covered in the media during a certain timeframe; however, it is important to recognize that such a list could not be classified as comprehensive.

In recent years, there has also been an influx of foreign interference events occurring in the European Union (EU). Like Canada and the US, some of the main perpetrators behind foreign interference in the EU are Russia and China. Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia is said to have increased their information operations across the EU. Though these actions are hardly new, given Russia's longstanding compatriots policy (Nikolko & Carment 2017).

The EU has been active in mitigating perceived threats, collaborating with academia, civil society and technology companies to do this. One way in which they have done this is through the creation of the EUvsDisinfo platform (Borrell, 2024). The platform has a large publicly available database of pro-Kremlin disinformation cases, and was created in 2015 by the European External Action's Service's East StratCom Task force with the goal of better understanding Russian disinformation campaigns within the EU.

The platform aims to increase understanding surrounding the country's information operations and develop media literacy skills of European citizens (EUvsDisinfo, n.d.). Such strategies are not without their weaknesses however as their gatekeeping function is a form of censorship. More importantly, the inclusion of ordinary citizens in countering hybrid threats embodies a new type of warfare that falls within the grey zone (Carment & Belo, 2018, see also the *Diaspora Criminogenic Reports* developed by CIFP for CISC, CIFP: Organized crime & Intelligence, n.d).

#### *4) Diaspora Policy NOT Diaspora Politics*

The nature of any diaspora community's relationship with the rest of Canada, its national contributions, and its linkages with its members' homeland depend in large part on the ability of

these communities to integrate into Canada and to gain access to national, provincial, and municipal programs and services. Although not all diaspora communities in Canada arrive economically underprivileged, many of those fleeing conflict homelands do. Added to this is the difficulty many new immigrants from Global South countries face trying to be politically and economically involved with their homelands, while at the same time establishing a home in Canada. Their influence in both their home and host country risks being undermined by a lack of time and resources.

Nonetheless, as the main source of growth for Canada's population, the importance of immigrants in Canada will only continue to increase. Since its inception, Canada has always been shaped by diaspora communities, but today's diaspora groups are truly transnational populations in a position to influence both home and host governments, shape their security, and influence trade, development, and investment policy preferences (Carment & Calleja, 2018).

Elected officials have an ethical duty to avoid getting caught up in the agendas and partisan interests of specific diaspora groups in order to ensure that perceptions of favouritism do not invite internal conflict. As previously discussed, a lack of integration into host countries can result in transportation of homeland conflicts into the host country, which can place increased pressure on social services and increase political tensions, both domestically and on the world stage, between Canada and its allies and adversaries alike.

By tracking proxy linkages, which are used to measure the components of fragility: authority, legitimacy and capacity (Carment & Calleja, 2018), Canada can better understand the positionality and alignment of diaspora groups within its borders. Proxy measures like this can help us better comprehend the ability of a diaspora group to be manipulated by a foreign

government for interference and influence purposes and the potential for homeland conflict transportation.

Transparency in politics is also badly needed. Behind-the-scenes lobbying is damaging the Canadian democratic process. Federal and provincial governments should not be instrumentalizing ethnic constituencies for political gain because it risks creating unevenness in outcomes and inequality in access. Moreover, there is a paucity of evidence that catering to specific groups strengthens Canada overall. The evidence we have presented in this study is that Canadian unity is weakened when our politicians play the diaspora card (Carment & Samy, 2012).

How might efforts be made to immunize diaspora from partisan manipulation? Amending the Multiculturalism Act to ensure the non-partisan independence of community organizations would be a good first step. Creating a federally funded arm's-length diaspora office would be another. These steps would reflect an understanding that participation in democratic institutions is fundamentally distinct from the short-term and self-interested partisan agendas of political parties.

An official diaspora policy might also generate reciprocity among groups and encourage them to cooperate on specific agendas. To this end, Canada needs better and more coherent policies specific to the Canadian context. The benefits that diaspora communities bring to this country must be sufficiently documented, strategized, and made policy relevant independently of political interests.

Recently, Global Affairs Canada underwent a significant diplomatic review. University graduate programmes that produce Canada's future diplomats must also rethink their purpose, if not their core competencies in the analysis of non-state actors, diaspora politics and conflict

transportation. The focus should not be on enemy driven or threat driven analytical frameworks but collective and shared problem solving (Carment, 2024). Until such a shift occurs, despite the copious funding invested in university-level defence and security research and advocacy, the Department of National Defence and CSIS will continue to face unmet challenges.

The absence of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are much needed to engage today's security environment has a direct impact on our ability to shape the world around us. Former CSIS officer, Huda Mukbil has written about how she confronted and overcame the fundamental and long-standing problem of systemic racism within Canada's security and intelligence institutions. Mukbil's experience shows, that failing to heed diverse and critical voices has a direct impact on realizing Canadian interests in an increasingly competitive world (Oladejo, 2024).

Moving forward, it is critical for Canada to continue to develop resiliency against foreign influence and interference to ensure its prosperity. The creation of a foreign agent registry with key measures of diaspora lobbying, and influence would be an excellent place for Canada to begin in the fight against foreign interference.

Canada must also reassert its presence abroad by re-engaging civil society. More broadly, Canada's multilateral agenda of supporting human rights needs fixing. Part of that weakening has arisen from the US circumventing or undermining the Bretton Woods institutions it helped create after World War II, for instance, the invasion of Iraq in 2004. Part of that weakening is our own hypocrisy in selecting where, when, and how we choose to advance human rights in some countries but not others.

With the decline in US influence, there is a concomitant increase in conflicts around the world stemming from geopolitical rivalries, struggles over freedom of expression, challenges to

ineffective governments, democratic backsliding, and mounting economic inequality at home and abroad. Until an effort is made to confront these fundamental issues, a coherent strategy to “kick-start” multilateral renewal to address shared global problems such as rising inequality, climate change, and pandemics will remain elusive.

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