

MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCE

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, President Donald J. Trump and his apologists attempted to blame his loss on foreign interference. They falsely claimed that foreign-manufactured voting machines had been manipulated so that votes cast for Trump were instead recorded as votes for Joseph R. Biden, Jr.¹ No one has ever, either at the time or since, offered any evidence to support Trump's assertion. On the contrary, ample evidence collected by the Intelligence Community (IC) and reviewed by the Select Committee disproves those claims.

That is not to say foreign actors made no attempt to influence the American political climate during and after the 2020 Presidential election. This appendix evaluates the role foreign influence played in the circumstances surrounding the insurrection.²

DISCUSSION

ELECTION MEDDLING IN 2020:

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE? NO. FOREIGN INFLUENCE? YES.

In its postmortem assessment of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, the Intelligence Community comprehensively examined two types of foreign meddling: interference and influence. The distinction between the two is critical in evaluating President Trump's repeated public assertions that there had been massive and widespread "fraud" that had the effect of "stealing" the election for then-candidate Biden.

For its analytic purposes, the Intelligence Community defines election *interference* as "a subset of election influence activities targeted at the technical aspects of the election, including voter registration, casting and counting ballots, or reporting results."³ That definition notes that election interference is a subset of election *influence*, which the Intelligence Community defines to include "overt and covert efforts by foreign governments or actors acting as agents of, or on behalf of, foreign governments intended to affect directly or indirectly a US election—including candidate, political parties, voters or their preferences, or political processes."⁴

The Intelligence Community's Assessment (ICA) found no factual basis for any allegation of technical interference with the 2020 U.S. election: "We have no indications that any foreign actor attempted to interfere in the 2020 US elections by altering any technical aspect of the voting process, including voter registration, ballot casting, vote tabulation, or reporting

results.”⁵ Put simply, allegations that foreign powers rigged voting machines and swapped ballots were false and unsupported.

Although there is no evidence of foreign technical interference in the 2020 election, there is evidence of foreign influence. Specifically, the Intelligence Community’s Assessment concluded that “Russian President Putin authorized, and a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden’s candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US.”⁶ The two Intelligence Community analytic conclusions about the 2020 U.S. Presidential election—that there was evidence of foreign influence, but not foreign interference—are completely consistent.

MALIGN FOREIGN EFFORTS TO INFLUENCE THE 2020 U.S. ELECTIONS

The 2020 U.S. elections saw an increase in the number of foreign state and non-state entities that attempted to influence the U.S. electorate. The U.S. Intelligence Community suggests, as a possible explanation, that more such foreign entities “may view influence operations as important tools for projecting power abroad.”⁷ More ascertainably, “[t]he growth of internet and social media use means foreign actors are more able to reach US audiences directly, while the tools for doing so are becoming more accessible.”⁸

The United States’ principal foreign adversaries—Russia, China, and Iran—all of them autocracies, engage, to varying degrees, in disguised efforts to influence U.S. public opinion.⁹ In the context of these overarching efforts,¹⁰ U.S. elections offer special opportunities.

For Russia, “[e]lections... often serve as an opportune target. But attacks on elections are typically just one part of ongoing, multi-pronged operations.”¹¹ The U.S. Intelligence Community’s definitive post-election assessment of foreign influence activities during the 2020 Presidential election concluded that Russia was deeply engaged in disinformation activities intended to influence the outcome by supporting President Trump while disparaging then-candidate Biden; Iran also engaged in efforts to influence the election’s outcome, but unlike Russia, did not actively promote any candidate; and that China considered opportunities to influence the election’s outcome, but ultimately decided that potential costs outweighed any foreseeable benefits.¹² Both Russia and Iran worked to undermine the American public’s confidence in U.S. democratic processes and to deepen socio-political divisions in the United States.¹³

RUSSIA’S MALIGN INFLUENCE EFFORTS TARGETING THE UNITED STATES

Russian malign disinformation efforts are both strategic in scope and opportunistic in nature. They aim to corrode the power and appeal of the U.S. democratic processes, worsen U.S. domestic divisions, and weaken America at home and abroad. The Intelligence Community’s February 2022

unclassified “Annual Threat Assessment” puts this sustained Russian threat in a nutshell:

Russia presents one of the most serious foreign influence threats to the United States, using its intelligence services, proxies, and wide-ranging influence tools to try to divide Western alliances, and increase its sway around the world, while attempting to undermine U.S. global standing, amplify discord inside the United States, and influence U.S. voters and decisionmaking.¹⁴

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Foreign adversaries’ influence campaigns routinely push disinformation to U.S. audiences. Elections offer an important forum for Russia and other U.S. adversaries to seek to deepen divisions within American society through disinformation campaigns.¹⁵ The Intelligence Community projects that both Russia and China will, for the foreseeable future, continue to press their disinformation campaigns attempting to undermine the U.S. population’s confidence in their government and society.¹⁶ Russia certainly did so in the period following the election and preceding the January 6th attack.

The disinformation spread by Russia and its messengers during that time was not, however, entirely original. The Intelligence Community Assessment found that Russia’s disinformation engine borrowed President Trump’s own words to achieve its goals:

Russian online influence actors generally promoted former President Trump and his commentary, including repeating his political messaging on the election results; the presidential campaign; debates; the impeachment inquiry; and, as the election neared, US domestic crises.¹⁷

Indeed, President Trump’s messaging during and after the 2020 election was reflected in Russian influence efforts at the time. In September of 2020, the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis warned that Russia was engaged in pre-election activity targeting the U.S. democratic process.¹⁸ The bulletin advised that “Russia is likely to continue amplifying criticisms of vote-by-mail and shifting voting processes amidst the COVID–19 pandemic to undermine public trust in the electoral process.”¹⁹

Deliberately spreading disinformation to discredit a U.S. election was not new to Russia’s influence arsenal. In the judgment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, it is a tactic Russia was prepared to deploy after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election:

Even after the [2020] election, Russian online influence actors continued to promote narratives questioning the election results and disparaging President Biden and the Democratic Party. These efforts parallel plans Moscow had in place in 2016 to discredit a potential incoming Clinton administration, but which it scrapped after former President Trump's victory.²⁰

Russian influence efforts in the 2016 and 2020 elections, while distinct in their particulars, shared some similarities. Historically, Russia has engaged in near-industrial scale online influence efforts.²¹ The Intelligence Community Assessment states that in 2020, Russia again relied on internet trolls to amplify divisive content aimed at American audiences:

The Kremlin-linked influence organization Project Lakhta and its Lakhta Internet Research (LIR) troll farm—commonly referred to by its former moniker Internet Research Agency (IRA)—amplified controversial domestic issues. LIR used social media personas, news websites, and US persons to deliver tailored content to subsets of the US population. LIR established short-lived troll farms that used unwitting third-country nationals in Ghana, Mexico, and Nigeria to propagate these US-focused narratives....²²

The threats posed by Russia's influence efforts are not new, nor are they diminishing. The latest unclassified Intelligence Community Annual Threat Assessment throws this into sharp relief:

Moscow has conducted influence operations against U.S. elections for decades, including as recently as the 2020 presidential election. We assess that it probably will try to strengthen ties to U.S. persons in the media and politics in hopes of developing vectors for future influence operations.²³

PROXIES AMONG US: MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND U.S. AUDIENCES

Tech-enabled or not, if ever there was a "people business," foreign influence is it. People working on behalf of a foreign government—foreign government officials, their agents, and proxies—work to influence, directly or indirectly, a target audience in another country—its officials and citizens at large. Most who are engaged in those efforts act overtly: ambassadors, consuls general, government delegations and so forth. Their foreign influence efforts are not, however, focused on philanthropy or foreign aid. Moreover, the perspectives they seek to embed in their target audiences may be intentionally and materially inaccurate, propagandistic, or driven by unstated motives. In such instances, foreign influence may amount to injecting foreign disinformation into the U.S. media ecosystem for re-branding and onward transmission to an American audience.²⁴

Foreign state adversaries of the United States generally disguise their efforts to influence U.S. audiences, particularly when they seek to influence U.S. voters' views in the run-up to an election. Among the many ways of concealing the foreign-state origin or sponsorship of such a message is to use unattributable proxies—"cut-outs"—or fully independent ideological allies in the United States as messaging organs. A cooperative American messenger—a proxy for the foreign government itself—may be needed to make the foreign-origin message congenial to the target American audience.

Malign foreign influencers, including foreign governments, used an additional such masking tool during the Trump administration: amplifying U.S.-originated messages so that they reached a broader audience. These influencers often took advantage of the algorithms by which social media platforms bring congenial messages and other information to users whose views are likely to be similar or compatible.

Shortly after the January 6th attack, the National Intelligence Council summarized the scope and significance of Russia's use of proxies in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election:

A key element of Moscow's strategy this election cycle was its use of proxies linked to Russian intelligence to push influence narratives—including misleading or unsubstantiated allegations against President Biden—to US media organizations, US officials, and prominent US individuals, including some close to former President Trump and his administration.²⁵

The success of the proxy depends on shielding its foreign sponsorship. For that reason, it can be difficult or impossible to determine conclusively whether someone parroting a foreign government adversary's point of view to a U.S. audience is that government's controlled proxy or a volunteer taking full advantage of U.S. First Amendment freedoms.

ANTI-U.S. FOREIGN STATE PROPAGANDA AND THE JANUARY 6TH ATTACK

U.S. adversaries use anti-American propaganda and disinformation to advance their strategic foreign policy objectives. They aim to corrode U.S. influence abroad while diluting U.S. citizens' trust in their democratic institutions and processes. They hope to deepen and sharpen the sociopolitical divisions in American society.²⁶ In doing so, foreign adversaries hope not only to limit U.S. ability to influence the policy choices of other foreign states, but also to help immunize their own populations against the attractions of American-style democracy.

That matters, as Russia and other adversaries of the United States well know. If the United States has long demonstrated such a globally effective cultural power to attract, its corrosion must be a primary strategic objective

of Russia or any other of the United States' principal adversaries. Accordingly, over the next 20 years, the Intelligence Community expects that "China and Russia probably will try to continue targeting domestic audiences in the United States and Europe, promoting narratives about Western decline and overreach."²⁷ The January 6th attack played into their hands.

PRESIDENT TRUMP AND THE 2020 ELECTION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FOREIGN INFLUENCE

With President Trump in the White House, Russia benefited from a powerful American messenger creating and spreading damaging disinformation it could amplify. The Intelligence Community's comprehensive March 2021 assessment noted that throughout the 2020 Federal election cycle, "Russian online influence actors generally promoted former President Trump and his commentary..."²⁸

President Trump's relentless propagation of the Big Lie damaged American democracy from within and made it more vulnerable to attack from abroad. His actions did not go unnoticed by America's adversaries, who seized on the opportunity to damage the United States. According to the Intelligence Community's March 2021 assessment, "[e]ven after the election, Russian online influence actors continued to promote narratives questioning the election results..."²⁹ What President Trump was saying was, in sum, exactly what the Russian government wanted said—but he was doing it on his own initiative and from the trappings of the Oval Office.

ENDNOTES

1. Taking the Trump conspiracy theory of manipulated Venezuelan voting machines head-on in an overarching assessment, the Intelligence Community's definitive post-election assessment stated: "We have no information suggesting that the current or former Venezuelan regimes were involved in attempts to compromise US election infrastructure." National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 8, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
2. For case studies illustrating how such efforts may have manifested at the Capitol on January 6th, see Staff Memo, "Case Studies on Malign Foreign Influence," (Dec. 19, 2022).
3. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), Definitions, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
4. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), Definitions, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
5. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), pp. i, 1, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived) (emphasis removed).

6. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. i, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived) (emphasis removed).
7. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 1, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
8. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 1, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
9. The U.S. Intelligence Community is well aware of these foreign influence campaigns, including in the context of elections. See, e.g., National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), pp. 4-5, 7, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived) ("Russian state media, trolls, and online proxies, including those directed by Russian intelligence, published disparaging content about President Biden, his family, and the Democratic Party, and heavily amplified related content circulating in US media ...", p. 4; "Iran's election influence efforts were primarily focused on sowing discord in the United States and exacerbating societal tensions ...", p. 5; "China has long sought to influence US policies by shaping political and social environments to press US officials to support China's positions and perspectives." p. 7). Over the next 20 years, the Intelligence Community assesses that "China and Russia probably will try to continue targeting domestic audiences in the United States and Europe, promoting narratives about Western decline and overreach." National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World," (March 2021), p. 94, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/GlobalTrends_2040_for_web1.pdf (archived).
10. The National Intelligence Council notes that "some foreign actors may perceive influence activities around US elections as continuations of broad, ongoing efforts rather than specially demarcated campaigns." National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 1, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
11. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the Environment, *Hearing on Undermining Democracy: Kremlin Tools of Malign Political Influence*, Testimony of Laura Rosenberger, 116th Cong., 1st sess., (May 21, 2019), p. 1, available at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20190521/109537/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-RosenbergerL-20190521.pdf>. Ms. Rosenberger was, at the time, Director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. In an August 2018 briefing for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Dr. John Kelly, the chief executive officer of Graphika, an analytics firm that studies online information flows, stated: "The data now available make it clear that Russian efforts are not directed against one election, one party, or even one country. We are facing a sustained campaign of organized manipulation, a coordinated attack on the trust we place in our institutions and in our media—both social and traditional." Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Open Hearing on Foreign Influence Operations' Use of Social Media Platforms*, Statement of Dr. John W. Kelly, 115th Cong., 2d sess., (Aug. 1, 2018), p. 1, available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/17963-john-w-kelly-chief-executive-officer-graphika>.
12. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. i, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived). But see, John Ratcliffe, Director of National Intelligence, "Views on Intelligence Community Election Security Analysis," (Jan. 7, 2021), available at <https://context-cdn.washingtonpost.com/notes/prod/default/documents/6d274110-a84b-4694-96cd-6a902207d2bd/note/733364cf-0afb-412d-a5b4-ab797a8ba154> (archived). In this

memorandum, DNI Ratcliffe, who had been in office seven months and lacked any prior intelligence experience, said he felt the need to “lead by example and offer my analytic assessment.” He argued that the ICA majority’s “high confidence” view that “China considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US presidential election” did not “fully and accurately reflect[] the scope of the Chinese government’s efforts to influence the 2020 U.S. federal elections.” Aside from the DNI’s very willingness to conclude, in conformity with then-President Trump’s contention but without reference to any supporting data, that the IC’s combined analytic judgment on China was wrong, this seems a very odd document for the DNI to have chosen to issue the day after the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.

13. National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. i, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived).
14. Office of the Director of Central Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” (Feb. 2022), at p. 12, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf> (emphasis removed).
15. The National Intelligence Council’s comprehensive post-election assessment covers the spectrum, including not only Russia, but also China, Iran, and others, as well as certain non-state actors. See generally, National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (archived). See also, “Dual U.S. / Russian National Charged With Acting Illegally As A Russian Agent In The United States,” Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney’s Office, S. Dist. N.Y., (Mar. 8, 2022), available at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/dual-us-russian-national-charged-acting-illegally-russian-agent-united-states> (archived); “Russian National Charged with Conspiring to Have U.S. Citizens Act as Illegal Agents of the Russian Government,” Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, (July 29, 2022), available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/russian-national-charged-conspiring-have-us-citizens-act-illegal-agents-russian-government> (archived).
16. National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. i, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.
17. National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 4, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.
18. Department of Homeland Security, “Russia Likely to Continue to Undermine Faith in U.S. Electoral Process,” Intelligence in Focus, (Sept. 3, 2020), at p. 1, available at <https://publicintelligence.net/dhs-russia-undermining-election/>.
19. Department of Homeland Security, “Russia Likely to Continue to Undermine Faith in U.S. Electoral Process,” Intelligence in Focus, (Sept. 3, 2020), at p. 1, available at <https://publicintelligence.net/dhs-russia-undermining-election/> (emphasis removed).
20. National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), pp. 4–5, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.
21. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Russian Active Measures Campaigns And Interference In The 2016 U.S. Election,” Volume 2, (Nov. 10, 2020), pp. 18–19, available at <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures>.
22. National Intelligence Council, “Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 4, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.

23. Office of the Director of Central Intelligence, "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," p. 12, (Feb. 7, 2022), available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.
24. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), at p. 1, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.
25. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), at p. i, Key Judgment 2, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf> (emphasis removed).
26. National Intelligence Council, "Emerging Dynamics – International: More Contested, Uncertain, and Conflict Prone – Contested and Transforming International Order – Increasing Ideological Competition," Global Trends 2040, 7th ed., (Mar. 2021), p. 95, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/GlobalTrends_2040_for_web1.pdf.
27. National Intelligence Council, "Emerging Dynamics – International: More Contested, Uncertain, and Conflict Prone – Contested and Transforming International Order – Increasing Ideological Competition," Global Trends 2040, 7th ed., (Mar. 2021), p. 94, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/GlobalTrends_2040_for_web1.pdf.
28. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 4, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.
29. National Intelligence Council, "Intelligence Community Assessment: Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," ICA 2020-00078D, (Mar. 10, 2021), p. 4, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.