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Foreign States Meddled in 2024 U.S. Election

By Diane Chido
Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Author Note: This article is intended to provide readers with basic information on foreign states interfering in recent U.S. elections. It may be more of an anthology of information than original analysis, as I preferred to use language from official investigative sources since the topic tends to have polarized perspectives.

The 2024 U.S. election ended without the forecasted violence or widespread election fraud claims. “Millions of illegals” did not vote in the election as doomsayers predicted, but foreign actors were certainly busy, as Founding Fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had predictably feared. In their day, they worried alternatively about Great Britain trying to end the American experiment in democracy and reclaim its lost colonies, and about the U.S. getting too cozy with France after its decisive support during the Revolutionary War and its descent into revolutionary violence. In 1787, Adams wrote to Jefferson from London:

You are apprehensive the President when once chosen, will be chosen again and again as long as he lives. So much the better as it appears to me. You are apprehensive of foreign Interference, Intrigue, Influence. So am I. But, as often as Elections happen, the danger of foreign Influence recurs. The less frequently they happen the less danger. And if the Same Man may be chosen again, it is probable he will be, and the danger of foreign

Influence will be less. Foreigners, seeing little Prospect will have less Courage for Enterprise.[i]

Wise as he may have often been, I cannot say that Adams' plan for an autocratic president for life, even if he was thinking of George Washington, best preserves the democratic process. However, his concerns were not unfounded. In 1796, a French official released private information to a popular Philadelphia newspaper in support of the famously Francophile Thomas Jefferson. As one Federalist Party member put it: "In short there never was so barefaced and disgraceful an interference of a foreign power in any free country."^[ii]

By 1798, members of the Federalist Party proposed and passed four laws, known as the Alien and Sedition Acts, to counter fears of efforts by non-citizens living in the United States endeavoring to export the ideals and excesses of the French Revolution and to ensure it would side with France in the event of a war. These pieces of legislation increased the citizenship residency requirement from five to 14 years and permitted non-citizens to be arrested, imprisoned, and deported during times of war. The Sedition Act made it a crime for American citizens to "print, utter, or publish ... any false, scandalous, and malicious writing" about the government.^[iii]

In addition to the Alien and Sedition Acts, the founders tried to limit foreign influence on the electoral process by requiring presidential candidates to be natural-born, not naturalized American citizens. They also included the Emoluments Clause in the Constitution, which states:

No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.^[iv]

The clause was meant to guard against corruption and treasonous allowance of foreign governments to influence public officials or elections by extension. As originally written, the Impeachment Clause only included crimes of treason and bribery as grounds for impeachment. The now familiar "high crimes and misdemeanors" is as obscure today as when it was added late in the constitutional negotiations because Virginia delegate George Mason thought impeachment should extend beyond two crimes.

In addition to the 1780s French political influence efforts was the 1917 "Zimmerman telegram," sent by the German Foreign Minister to his ambassador in Mexico. It promised to help Mexico reclaim its territory ceded to the United States if it joined Germany in World War I. Mexico declined, and the publication of the telegram helped push the American public attitude toward entering the war.

This year, China, Iran, and Russia tried numerous approaches to sway or generally interfere with the process in ways our forebears would not have anticipated. Despite these prior concerns, most modern Americans first thought about foreign interference during the 2016 election. Senate Intelligence Committee Vice Chairman Mark Warner's statement, released in July 2019, summarized the investigation results:

When the Russians attacked elections systems in 2016, neither the federal government nor the states were adequately prepared. Our bipartisan investigation identified multiple problems and information gaps that hindered our ability to effectively respond and defend against the Russian attack in 2016. Since then – and in large part as a result of the bipartisan work done on this issue in our Committee – the intelligence community, DHS (Department of Homeland Security), the FBI (the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and the states have taken steps to ensure that our elections are far more secure today than they were in 2016. But there's still much more we can and must do to protect our elections. I hope the bipartisan findings and recommendations outlined in this report will underscore to the White House and all of our colleagues, regardless of political party, that this threat remains urgent, and we have a responsibility to defend our democracy against it.[v]

The agencies responsible for securing the election process at all levels moved into high gear, and there were no credible reports of effective interference that would have changed the results in either the 2020 or 2024 elections, nor in their respective midterms. This did not remove the threat, though.

In 2024, China began working to undermine local and state elections, knowing that it would be more difficult to operate on the federal level and that most Washington officials are opposed to Chinese policies and plans. Rather than attacking election infrastructure, which has largely been taken offline, China has used online platforms to plant disinformation intended to increase division within the electorate on contentious issues surrounding immigration, border security, and social justice issues in an operation called *Spamouflage* or *Dragonbridge* since 2017. Another Chinese operation called *Taizi Flood* created thousands of fake accounts across 50 platforms posing as activists to inflame tensions around pro-Palestinian protest movements. It has also attempted to cultivate local officials to help influence policy decisions and stoke division, wittingly or otherwise.

These information operations are rapidly multiplying thanks to the capabilities of artificial intelligence. They have also had real impact by swatting, a tactic in which fake calls divert police to various locations, reducing their ability to dispatch to real trouble. The foreign operations have also caused bomb threats that have a

similar result on thinning first responders and law enforcement for real threats. They have similarly conducted intimidation operations on election and other officials with threats to their safety. Experts say these operations are now moving at “internet speed” while our prevention and deterrence efforts still move at “analog speed.”^[vi]

Programs such as the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center and the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center have held national information sessions online to help election officials around the country prepare for and prevent these activities from influencing elections.

Iran has focused mainly on disrupting the presidential election by funding and otherwise supporting pro-Palestinian groups expand protests and information campaigns. In addition, they have engaged in information theft and influence campaigns, as noted in a September 2024 Treasury Department report on sanctions placed on seven Iranian agents:

Since at least May 2024, Masoud Jalili and other Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members compromised several accounts of officials and advisors to a 2024 presidential campaign and leaked stolen data to members of the media and other persons for the purpose of influencing the 2024 U.S. presidential election, using technical infrastructure.^[vii]

As noted in an earlier piece on [Iran-U.S. relations](#), the Revolutionary Guard Corps controls Iran’s internet and owns several large companies providing access to technical infrastructure. The Treasury Press Release also notes that Emennet Pasargad, an Iranian cybersecurity company:

Led an online operation to intimidate and influence American voters, and to undermine voter confidence and sow discord, in connection with the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Emennet Pasargad personnel obtained or attempted to obtain U.S. voter information from U.S. state election websites, sent threatening emails to intimidate voters, and crafted and disseminated disinformation pertaining to the election and election security.

Unlike China’s more strategic approach to long-term cultivation of local officials, who might help them in the near-term or who may end up in higher office in the future, Iran seems to desire stoking anti-Israeli sentiments, which harmed the Democratic campaign by ramping up pro-Palestinian protests. However, Iran also seemed to be interested in obstructing the Republican campaign, potentially in retaliation for President Donald Trump’s January 2020 order to assassinate

Qassem Sulemani, commander of the Quds Force, the foreign intelligence branch of the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

In a failed June 2024 cyberattack, Iranian hackers from the Revolutionary Guard Corps stole an internal document related to the vetting process for Vice President-elect J.D. Vance and for U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., in a “hack-and-leak” operation, sending the stolen information to Politico and The Washington Post, both of which declined to share the information further or with their readers. They only confirmed that they received the information. The attack used phishing, a tactic by which a legitimate-seeming email with a malicious link is sent to a targeted account with the intent that the recipient will click on the link, which allows the hacker to enter the recipient’s email system, look around, and retrieve information and even send emails surreptitiously to other accounts internal and external to the original organization.

Apparently, Iran had previously hacked into President Donald Trump’s X account by guessing his password: maga2020. In September 2024, a man with ties to Iran was charged by the U.S. Justice Department with involvement in a foiled assassination attempt targeting Trump. President Joe Biden’s campaign was also offered materials obtained by Iranian hackers the sender claimed were Trump’s final preparation for the presidential debate, which Biden officials declined.^[viii]

Also in September 2024, the Justice Department disrupted an influence operation named *Doppelganger* ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s administration to “covertly spread Russian government propaganda with the aim of reducing international support for Ukraine, bolstering pro-Russian policies and interests, and influencing voters in U.S. and foreign elections, including the U.S. 2024 Presidential Election.”^[ix] The report details that the Russian government used “cybersquatting, fabricated influencers, and fake profiles to covertly promote AI-generated false narratives on social media. Those narratives targeted specific American demographics and regions in a calculated effort to subvert our election.”

Cybersquatting is a new term for me. The legal definition is “unauthorized registration and use of Internet domain names that are identical or similar to trademarks, service marks, company names, or personal names.” Cybersquatters use these web domains with the intention of profiting from the trusted name of the trademark’s owner. This can be by diverting traffic to the fabricated website away from the real company or organization or by holding the domain ransom for payment by the legal entity.^[x] The graphic shows an exhibit from the Justice Department affidavit illustrating how the “squatters” mimicked The Washington Post to spread disinformation.^[xi]

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The issue of attempted foreign influence on American politics is not new and will not go away. It is comforting to know that agencies are working to be as vigilant as they have been in the past decade to counter these efforts, but threats are likely to become more numerous and harder to identify as technology advances.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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