

NE Insights Countering Foreign Interference



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**This is an interactive document. Please click on the section numbers to jump to preferred sections.*



We are very aware that as a small country we are susceptible to influences from all sides. At the end of the day, what is important for us, small though we may be, it is that we are our own people, we make our own choices, and it really comes down to Singaporeans, deciding on the future of our country.

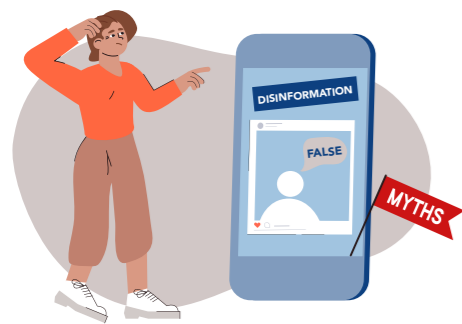
Remarks by PM Lawrence Wong (former DPM)
at a Dialogue at the Center for Strategic and
International Studies on 13 Oct 2023

01 What is Foreign Interference?

Foreign Interference (FI) refers to activities conducted by foreign actors - such as foreign governments and organisations - that interfere in the politics and policies of the target country, in order to advance the foreign actor's own interests.



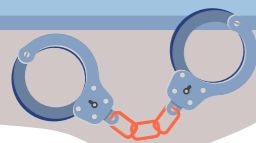
FI is not new and many countries engage in it. It is prevalent today because social media facilitates it.



FI is typically carried out through deceptive means. This includes the use of:

- Disinformation, which is the deliberate dissemination of fabricated or falsified content that aims to mislead and deceive.
- Local proxies who seek to influence the opinions and attitudes of the public.

Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act



FI activities are illegal. They may be dealt with under various legal levers such as the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act, Broadcasting Act, Computer Misuse Act and the Internal Security Act.

02 Why Are Countries Concerned

Foreign interference can undermine the decision making autonomy of a country, trust in its leadership and the cohesiveness and unity of its people. Here are some examples that have been reported in the mainstream media.

Russian Interference in American Politics

In 2016, the Russian government reportedly weaponised social media and funded 'troll farms' to generate fake news and provocative campaign material to divide American society and discredit their elections.



Chinese 'Spamouflage' Disinformation Campaign in Canada

In 2023, a China-linked network of bots allegedly posted thousands of messages on the social media accounts of dozens of Members of Parliament, accusing them of ethical and criminal violations.



US Disinformation Campaign in the Philippines

The US military allegedly ran a covert anti-vax campaign in 2020 and 2021 to disparage and undermine China and its vaccine.

Phony internet accounts impersonating Filipinos condemned the quality of the Chinese vaccine that was going to be made available in the Philippines by its government, turning public opinion against the government's policy and undermining the public's trust in the vaccine.

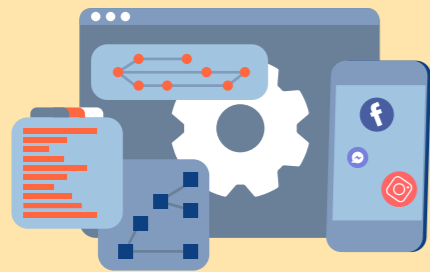


03 Singapore's Vulnerability to Foreign Interference

With big power contestation and ongoing conflicts and disputes around the world, countries may exert influence on others to choose sides. Some of these attempts may come in the form of foreign interference.

As a small country with an open economy and highly digitally connected and diverse society, Singapore could get caught up in this. Segments of our population consume narratives spread on messaging applications as well as from foreign media, published or broadcasted in English or their mother tongue, and these may be channels for foreign interference.

Why Singapore may be a target?



High level of digital-connectedness



Multi-racial and religious society



Our small size

Think about it

► Others will seek to divide us. Are we ready?



“Our racial and religious mix is easily exploitable by different countries. ... [We] see a steady build-up of different narratives, which is being very cleverly done. It is not obvious propaganda, but it conditions people to think in certain ways, particularly on foreign policy issues, often appealing to a larger racial identity, beyond the Singaporean identity.”

Speech by Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam at the Second Reading of the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill on 4 Oct 2021

04 Singapore is Not Immune to Foreign Interference

In our history, Singapore has been the target of numerous FI attempts.

Scan the QR code to find out more about past FI attempts against Singapore.



Today, FI is still a threat to Singapore and can undermine our social cohesion and resilience.

A recent example of FI via local proxy



A senior academic from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy was deported from Singapore in 2017.

Huang Jing engaged influential Singaporeans and senior public officials with the intent of influencing Singapore's foreign policy.

He claimed to provide 'privileged information' about a foreign country, in order to influence opinions in favour of that country.



Online commentary on Singapore's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War

Singapore took a clear stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and imposed sanctions on Russia in response to her invasion of Ukraine.

Anonymous accounts on social media created and spread narratives that criticised Singapore's position on the Russia-Ukraine war.

Potential cases of FI in the information domain

Online commentary on 2023 Presidential Elections

Commentors on *ixigua* opined that Singapore is a 'Chinese country' that should have Chinese leaders.

An article was circulated on WeChat, Weixin, and Kuaishou titled, "After Lee Hsien Loong retires, Singapore may fall into the hands of Indians".

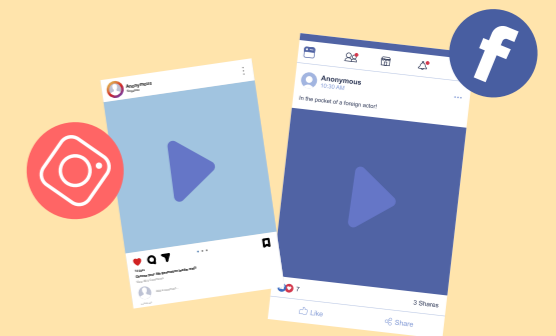


Social Media Platforms linked to Guo Wengui

The Ministry of Home Affairs issued directions under the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act to five social media platforms to block 95 online accounts that were linked to Guo Wengui.

The Ministry assessed that they had the intent and capability to mount hostile information campaigns against Singapore.

These accounts posted videos alleging that Singapore was 'in the pocket of a foreign actor' when choosing her 4th Generation leader.



Think about it

► What consequences would there be if these narratives were widely circulated and believed among Singaporeans?

05 Defending Singapore and Our Way of Life

We must ourselves defend Singapore and our way of life.

- FI is a serious threat to our national security and social cohesion.
- Everyone has a part to play to strengthen our defences against FI.
- As Singaporeans, let's commit to protect our national interests and sovereignty.

How can I play my part to counter FI?



Stop

- Do not share with others or circulate information which you receive, but are not sure about its origin or authenticity.



Check

- Look for other sources to confirm whether what you are reading is true.
- Check the URL carefully.
- The individual or organisation associated with a social media post may not always be authentic - they could be paid astroturfers or bots.



Report

- Contact ISD at 1800-2626-473 (1800-2626-ISD) or isd@mha.gov.sg to report suspected FI.

06 Find Out More: Suggested Readings

Kalenský, J., & Osadchuk, R. (2024, January 24). Hybrid CoE Research Report 11: How Ukraine fights Russian disinformation: Beehive vs mammoth. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-research-report-11-how-ukraine-fights-russian-disinformation-beehive-vs-mammoth/>



Meta, "Meta's Adversarial Threat Report, Third Quarter 2022", 22 Nov 2022. <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/11/metasecurity-threat-report-q3-2022>



Meta. Meta's Threat Disruptions. <https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/metasecurity/threat-reporting/>



Ministry of Home Affairs. Introduction to Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) <https://www.mha.gov.sg/fica>



07 Glossary of Terms Related to Foreign Interference

Astroturfing: The attempt to create an impression of widespread grassroots support where none exists.

Bot: An automated programme commonly used on social media platforms to spread false information, promote particular stories or information, or push certain viewpoints or agendas.

Cultivation of political entities: The cultivation of favourable relationships with a political party/candidate by the foreign actor. It could entail promises of business, donations or titles, under legitimate guise (e.g., academic titles, institutional linkages).

Deepfake: Image or footage that has been convincingly altered and manipulated through artificial intelligence to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something.

Disinformation: Fabricated or falsified content that aims to mislead and deceive. Not limited to fake news. Disinformation can include deceptive advertisements, doctored documents, and manipulated websites.

Election interference: Attempting to shape the voting behaviour of the electorate in a manner consistent with the desired political outcomes of the foreign actor, through activities such as hacking, spreading disinformation, or funding political campaigns.

Fake news: False news reports masquerading as real news with the intent of misleading or manipulating narratives.

Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act: Introduced to prevent, detect and disrupt foreign interference in our domestic politics conducted through (i) hostile information campaigns and (ii) local proxies (Politically Significant Persons).

Hostile information campaign: Carried out by foreign actors using online tools and sophisticated information operations to polarise the society of the target country, influence its domestic discourse, or undermine its political sovereignty, in order to advance the interests of the foreign actor.

Misinformation: Misinformation is the sharing of inaccurate and misleading information, but may not be intended to deceive.

Sentiment amplification: The deliberate attempt to artificially inflate the spread and prominence of narratives within an online space. Such amplification could involve the coordinated use of fake accounts, bots, and trolls.

Troll: Persons masquerading as real online users spreading false messages to drive certain narratives or provoke certain emotional reactions.



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or email us at nexus@defence.gov.sg

