



DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE OR POTENTIAL FOREIGN INTERFERENCE?

WHAT IS CONSIDERED ACCEPTABLE OUTREACH ?

Know the difference

RESEARCH SECURITY CENTRE

This brief will explore the difference between acceptable diplomatic conduct and foreign interference and what is considered acceptable outreach to your institutions. It will also offer guidance on how to be more vigilant to prevent harming your institutions' interests, researchers, and students.

IS IT DIPLOMATIC INFLUENCE OR POTENTIAL FOREIGN INTERFERENCE?

All diplomatic missions, including foreign missions in Canada, must adhere to the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic relations. **Diplomatic influence** is a normal part of international affairs that consists in using diplomats to influence government decisions and is not the same as foreign interference. Foreign partners regularly seek to influence the decisions we make as a country, just as Canada seeks to influence the decisions of theirs. Diplomatic influence includes activities such as public advocacy, official lobbying, cultural diplomacy, public communication and economic pressure (within bounds).

Foreign Interference differs from acceptable diplomatic conduct and is used by foreign state actors, or those acting on their behalf, to advance political, economic and security interests to the detriment of Canada's. Normal diplomatic activities can easily become interference when activities are hidden, deceptive, or compromise research independence, even if they do not clearly violate the law. Key features of foreign interference include activities that are: hidden or deceptive, unauthorized or illegal, coercive or manipulative, or that target core political processes or rights.

In Canada, Foreign interference is against the law.¹ [CSIS' 2025 Public Report](#) highlights that foreign interference and espionage continue to be central national security concerns, as well as threats to economic and research security. This includes attempts to access sensitive research, intellectual property, emerging technologies, as well as governance and policy. CSIS identifies five principal state actors as the primary perpetrators, but the risk of foreign interference is not limited to these actors, as any state may attempt to interfere in Canada.

On campus, it threatens the integrity of research and challenges academic freedom, and situations involving foreign interference may not always be straightforward in real-time. Universities are especially vulnerable because:

- Universities prize openness, trust, and global engagement
- Power asymmetries exist (e.g., visa dependence, funding scarcity)
- Students may be especially vulnerable to coercion
- Academic legitimacy can be leveraged to launder influence
- Research is conducted at formative stages, where sensitive technologies and intellectual property may be more accessible, less protected, and more easily influenced or appropriated.

There have been several alleged cases of foreign interference and espionage attempts taking place on campuses or research laboratories around the world, notably in the United Kingdom, United States, and even here in Canada.



[Case](#)



[Case](#)



[Case](#)

While majority of foreign or diplomatic outreach and collaborations are appropriate and mutually beneficial as they occur through legitimate, lawful, and transparent diplomatic channels, boundaries can at times be crossed and constitute foreign interference. Here are a few examples of what this might look like:

Example 1

A student or researcher acting as a proxy for a Consulate is coerced to spy on his fellow classmates or colleagues and suggested you download a messaging phone application (App) to communicate. Without your knowledge, this person spies on you and your research by asking intrusive or sensitive questions through the App. In some countries, government authorities may have legal access to data from platforms, including messages or metadata, and can monitor it to gather intelligence.

¹ On June 20, 2024, Parliament enacted Bill C-70, *An Act respecting countering foreign interference*. It was brought into force to bolster Canada's ability to detect, disrupt, and counter foreign interference threats in Canada. It further introduces measures under the Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act (FITAA) for mandatory public registry for individuals and entities acting on behalf of foreign principals to influence Canadian political or governmental processes.

Example 2

A Consular official reaches out to university leadership to ask privileged and identifiable information on their student body. The Consulate then uses this information to monitor students with a view to conducting transnational repression – a form of foreign interference in which foreign governments, or those acting on their behalf, harass, threaten or harm individuals or groups to silence criticism and dissent.

Example 3

A Foreign Government sponsoring a conference at a Canadian institution attempts to overly suppress, shape, or control what can be discussed on campus at that event. This may include interfering with speaker selection and preventing discussions that could conflict with the countries' political position. To further reinforce its demands, the sponsor indicates that research funding may be reduced or withdrawn if the requested changes are not adopted.

On campus, foreign interference occurs where influence is hidden, coercive, or directed at controlling academic freedom, governance, or the political expression of students and faculty outside the bounds of open scholarly exchange.

Acceptable Outreach	Potential Foreign Interference Warning Signs
✓ Diplomatic missions openly meeting university leadership to promote collaboration in research.	! Covert relationships with leadership, academic or researchers to influence research. ! Requesting sensitive personal or research information unrelated to the stated purpose.
✓ Country-to-country formal agreements for academic and research collaboration and information-sharing.	! Undisclosed direction of research and requesting unusual confidentiality or secrecy on outreach or collaborations. ! Pressure to avoid institutional reporting and disclosure or data sharing requirements inconsistent with Canadian law or institutional policy. ! Covertly steering research toward military, intelligence, or dual use outcomes.
✓ Foreign countries hosting or sponsoring cultural events and conferences to promote collaboration.	! <u>Unofficial consular or “community service”</u> activities outside recognized diplomatic channels. ! Funding tied to political conditions and narrative control.
✓ Foreign countries hosting or sponsoring cultural events and conferences to promote collaboration.	! Dictating the terms of teaching learning programs and teaching content.
✓ Diplomatic missions sharing communications with their nationals (e.g., emergency preparedness or personal safety).	! Monitoring community members through Embassy entry/exit registry.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

When approached by a foreign entity or government, although it could be for completely legitimate reasons, you must still exercise a high degree of caution.

- **Be alert.** If a request for information seems out of the ordinary or suspicious, consult your peers or report it to relevant internal authorities (e.g., research services or research security offices) to confirm legitimacy. Institutions often have established processes to support researchers with such matters.
- **Do your due diligence.** Before responding to a request from a foreign state actor, verify that the request complies with internal policies and with applicable provincial and federal privacy and access to information legislation.
- **Report it.** You can report or share tips on suspected foreign interference, espionage, terrorism and other threats with federal authorities, such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or CSIS. Additional information on how to report can be found on [Public Safety Canada's website](#).
- **When in doubt, reach out.** You can reach out to the Research Security Centre at researchsecurity-securiteenrecherche@ps-ps.gc.ca if you have concerns about a potential case of foreign interference affecting your research.
- **Immediate safety risk.** Call 911 and contact your Campus Safety team to explore whether a Safety Plan is appropriate.