

Canada's 'China Syndrome'

The obsession with foreign plots to undermine our institutions is a hallmark of the erosion of political discourse in Canada

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As the war in Ukraine stalls, or moves towards the possibility of a Chinese-brokered peace agreement that would conclusively prove the waning influence of US hegemony, the empire and its provinces seek to renew tensions with an old enemy.

The allegation that China attempted to interfere in Canada's 2019 and 2021 federal elections is just the latest example of Sinophobic hysteria conjured up by the agencies whose actions remind us that the term 'military intelligence' is an oxymoron.

It was just a few weeks ago that the useful idiots of the American military industrial complex were demanding Canada boost defence spending in response to the apparent threat of Chinese spy balloons (Conservative MP Michael Chong thinks the balloon barrage [warrants participation](#) in an American-led ballistic missile defense program of dubious utility). The American military had not even proven the first balloon was in fact being used for espionage purposes when it dispatched fighter jets to shoot down several more objects (each with missiles costing \$400,000 a piece), all of which are now believed to be [weather balloons launched by hobbyists](#). Information about the first balloon, which was apparently retrieved by the US Navy, remains confidential. American and Canadian efforts to recover the other objects were [suspended](#).

Meanwhile, we are told the COVID-19 pandemic originated in a leak from a Chinese laboratory. This conclusion was made with 'low confidence' and comes from new information which [remains hidden from the public](#). The theory that was once popularized by Trump supporters and other conspiracy theorists is now being reported as plausible if not likely by those who had once rejected it. The idea that the virus leaked from a Chinese government lab is no more credible today than it was when far-right politicians and pundits were [weaponizing uncertainty](#) for personal gain at the start of the pandemic. But it certainly sounds sinister. Evoking the spectre of a 'Chinese government lab' conjures images, either of secret military bioweapons, or lax safety standards and subpar security. The truth of the

matter is neither of these things: the Wuhan Institute of Virology is one of the safest laboratories in China, well-known among the global community of epidemiologists and virologists for its work studying coronaviruses, not to mention its collaborations with similar labs in Canada, the United States, and France. There is in fact [no new evidence](#) pointing towards the lab leak hypothesis. The likeliest answer is still that the virus made its way to humans through an intermediate host.

Continuing this trend of creeping Sinophobia, we are now expected to believe that China attempted to interfere in the last two federal elections, a claim whose evidence has been withheld from the public but apparently shared widely with the intelligence services of several other nations. The theory—and it is only a theory until much better evidence is made available to the public—suggests that China interfered in our election only enough to ensure Justin Trudeau would be re-elected prime minister, but without a majority government. Thus, the theory suggests, a nominally pro-Beijing leader (and, by extension, party) has been installed with the assistance of the People’s Republic, though without the power of the full confidence of the house or a full term in office.

Here’s where the Canadian Security Intelligence Service’s (CSIS) bizarre conspiracy theory begins to fall apart: either we’re expected to believe Trudeau and his Liberal government is a benefit to China or it isn’t. The idea that China favoured the Liberals, but only enough to bring about an unstable minority government that would “keep Mr. Trudeau’s power in check” seems to be both inconsistent, if not inherently contradictory. It is a case of trying to make the actual (and unanticipated) outcomes of the federal elections fit a pre-conceived notion of Chinese interference.

In other words, it looks like CSIS is trying to make facts fit its predetermined conclusion, rather than drawing conclusions from the verifiable fact that two unpopular Conservative Party leaders failed to galvanize sufficient public support to win two separate federal elections, and that Trudeau’s uninspired record as prime minister was equally incapable of delivering him majority governments. It is remarkable to note that Canada has started its ‘election interference’ frenzy just as the Americans are beginning to come around to the reality that ‘Russiagate’ was [always mostly nonsense](#). The Democrats lost the 2016 US election because they ran an unpopular candidate who campaigned poorly. Donald Trump didn’t need any assistance from Russia.

Reporting by the *Globe and Mail*’s Robert Fife and Steven Chase indicates CSIS believes there was a broad Chinese government-led operation designed to ensure a Trudeau minority government, and to further ensure certain Conservative candidates were defeated. This isn’t a new story, either. In November of 2022 *Global News* reporter Sam Cooper [published an article](#) in which unnamed CSIS agents alleged that as many as 11 federal candidates may have received funding or additional support from the Chinese government prior to the 2019 federal election and that federal candidates may be affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party. They also claimed that the Chinese government had placed agents in the offices of MPs in order to influence policy, “co-opt and corrupt former Canadian officials to gain leverage in Ottawa” and “punish Canadian politicians whom the People’s Republic of China views as threats to its interests.” According to the report, CSIS made Trudeau aware of this as early as January of 2022, but the prime minister took no action. In the same report, *Global* indicates that while CSIS knows who these people are, the briefings delivered to the prime minister did not include their names. *Global*’s sources also weren’t able to confirm who had received these briefings, or the specific timing of when that information was

shared.

Global's sources indicate that, whatever intelligence CSIS has, it had not at that point drawn any conclusions about whether the alleged conspiracy had any impact on the 2019 federal election.

A look at the results of that vote seems to confirm this. If there was in fact a concerted effort by the Chinese government to influence the election in favour of the Liberals, it was a spectacular failure. Of the 20 seats lost by the Liberals, most were lost to Conservative candidates in parts of the country where the Chinese-Canadian population is not especially high, such as rural ridings in the Maritimes and southern Québec, or urban ridings in the major cities of the Prairies. According to the *Globe and Mail* report, CSIS agents allege that the operation focused on 11 mostly Liberal candidates in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The difference between the 2015 results and the 2019 results in the GTA were negligible for either party. But assuming this subterfuge actually helped turn the majority of the seats in favour of the Liberals, this wouldn't have changed the ultimate result of the election.

The allegation is that, while China preferred Trudeau to lead, they didn't want him to have the power of a majority government. According to CSIS, an unnamed Chinese consular official and an unspecified Chinese diplomatic mission in Canada said that Beijing "likes it when the parties in Parliament are fighting with each other, whereas if there is a majority, the party in power can easily implement policies that do not favour the PRC."

This also appears to be a contradictory position. Trudeau is alleged to be both a friend to Beijing as well as someone who can't be trusted with a majority government, as this could result in anti-Beijing policies. As to the bickering between parties, one might argue that this would be the status quo for any Canadian parliament (parties of differing political orientations in a first-past-the-post electoral system tend to aggressively compete with one another rather than form coalitions). But even here, if the aim of the subterfuge was to keep Trudeau in check and Canadian political parties bickering with one another, despite the incredible sophistication of this operation, how is it that the Chinese didn't realize the possibility of some kind of Liberal-NDP agreement, such as that which keeps the Liberals in a de facto majority position to this day?

Moreover, how could anyone reasonably consider Justin Trudeau to be any friendlier to Beijing than whoever happens to be at the helm of the Conservative Party?

Remember, Canada's relationship with China has depreciated during Trudeau's time in office, not least because of the Meng Wenzhou affair, in which his government amply demonstrated it was [all too willing](#) to arrest a Chinese national at the behest of the Trump administration. Under Trudeau, Canada's foreign policy has been materially the same as US policy towards China, and is generally no less Sinophobic.

The idea that China may be meddling in our democratic processes is not new. Back in the mid-1990s, RCMP and CSIS agents produced a joint report called Project Sidewinder that made many of the same allegations currently being peddled by anonymous CSIS agents. The report's conclusions were dismissed by CSIS managers in 1997 as a "rumour-laced conspiracy theory with little factual evidence." The idea that we're threatened by a rising Asian power, and being undermined by Asian people, isn't new either—these have been hallmarks of official and casual Canadian anti-Asian racism dating back to the 19th century. Most Canadians don't realize, as an example, that people of Japanese descent were

prohibited from voting, and required to carry identification cards, both before the Second World War, as well as after.

In an essay published in the *New York Review of Books*, Umberto Eco outlined the [14 typical elements of fascist societies](#), one of which seems amply demonstrated by our present 'China syndrome.' Eco wrote that fascist societies portray their enemies as being simultaneously both strong and weak, and this is how China is depicted in the examples offered above. China is held up as having a sophisticated global surveillance network, but one that weakly relies on 'spy balloons.' It has a secret, state-of-the-art bioweapons program, but it is run by incompetents who accidentally released one of their less lethal pathogens sparking a global pandemic. Chinese agents have infiltrated our electoral processes and the inner sanctum of a major political party, yet they can't influence favourable foreign policy or anticipate likely election outcomes. Eco further stipulates that an obsession with foreign plots to undermine the nation's institutions (as well as a healthy dose of generalized xenophobia) is a hallmark of a society degrading into fascism.

Justin Trudeau has now announced two probes into allegations of Chinese election interference, proving that all that separates a likely lie from a plausible truth is how often the lie is repeated. The federal government will now waste precious resources investigating a mirage, a projection of our insecurities in a rapidly changing world, while bellicose forces within our society and politics use this as an opportunity to further their agendas.

Now is a good time to remember that CSIS (of [forgotten briefcases](#) in stadium parking lots fame) [didn't think](#) the far-right occupation of Ottawa was a national security threat.

And that Eco's warnings weren't about a possible future, but of how things have been for a very long time.

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Featured image: The flag of the People's Republic of China flies at the Embassy of China in Ottawa. Photo from Flickr.

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