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FMI Primer

INTRODUCTION

An Introduction to Foreign Malign Influence

The United States is a free and open society that engages with foreign countries to protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity and democratic values, and to shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive. All countries have reasons to engage with each other, and such interactions are to be expected. However, some foreign countries exploit these norms to carry out malign influence activities within free and open spaces in democratic societies.

When foreign actors exploit public discussions protected by free speech, educational institutions protected by academic freedom, and open economies protected by the free market to influence how Americans think, act, and make decisions via subversive, undeclared, coercive, or criminal means, we call this foreign malign influence, or FMI for short.

FMI activities frequently involve multiple actors and pathways. Malign influence agents may include foreign government officials, intelligence services, cyber actors, criminal groups, state-run media organizations, social media actors, and businesses with close ties to government officials. Foreign malign actors may hide their true affiliations to appear like U.S. citizens, trustworthy news sources, or benevolent participants in America's institutions and processes. [Some foreign malign actors gather personal information so they can target, influence, and coerce individuals or groups in the United States.](#) What distinguishes FMI from routine diplomacy and other foreign influence is that it uses subversive, undeclared, coercive, or criminal methods to target individuals or groups in the United States with the ultimate goal of harming the United States, its institutions, or its political system.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)'s [Global Trends 2040 report](#) indicates that democracies will continue to face FMI efforts aimed at weakening confidence in democratic systems and elections. The strength of U.S. institutions relies on informed and engaged U.S. citizens. This primer aims to help Americans better understand and recognize FMI threats against our democratic institutions and processes.



WHAT IS FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE (FMI), AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF INFLUENCE CARRIED OUT BY FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS?

Foreign actors, whether governments or non-state entities, often try to influence the politics and policies of other countries to benefit their interests through diplomacy, trade agreements, military alliances, development projects, cultural events, and even economic pressures.

FMI is a type of foreign influence that includes one, or a combination of, the following characteristics:

- **Subversive:** intends to undermine the United States, its institutions, political systems, or the will of the American people
- **Undeclared:** intends to hide a foreign country's hand
- **Coercive:** pressures individuals or groups in the United States to make decisions or support policies that favor a foreign country
- **Criminal:** violates U.S. law

When foreign influence activities by governments, non-state actors, or their proxies meet any of the characteristics above and aim to sow division among Americans, weaken confidence in democratic institutions and processes, or influence U.S. policy decisions in favor of a foreign actor's interests, the Intelligence Community characterizes them as FMI.

Who are the Most Common FMI Threat Actors?

A range of foreign countries—most prominently the People's Republic of China (PRC), Iran, and Russia—and their agents have carried out both overt and covert malign influence activities against the United States and U.S. citizens. [\[Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community 2024\]](#)

RUSSIA

Russia will remain a serious foreign influence threat because of its wide-ranging efforts to try to divide Western alliances, undermine U.S. global standing, and sow domestic discord, including among voters inside the United States and U.S. partners around the world. Russia's war in Ukraine will continue to feature heavily in its messaging.

- Moscow views U.S. elections as opportunities and has conducted influence operations for decades, as recently as the U.S. midterm elections in 2022. Russia is contemplating how U.S. electoral outcomes in 2024 could impact Western support to Ukraine and probably will attempt to affect the elections in ways that best support its interests and goals.
- Russia's influence actors have adapted their efforts to better hide their hand, and may use new technologies, such as generative AI, to improve their capabilities and reach into Western audiences.



CHINA (PRC)

PRC is expanding its global covert influence posture to better support the Chinese Communist Party's goals, sowing doubts about U.S. leadership, undermining democracy, and extending Beijing's influence. Beijing's information operations primarily focus on promoting pro-China narratives, refuting U.S.-promoted narratives, and countering U.S. and other countries' policies that threaten Beijing's interests, including China's international image, access to markets, and technological expertise.

- Beijing's growing efforts to actively exploit perceived U.S. societal divisions using its online personas move it closer to Moscow's playbook for influence operations.
- China is demonstrating a higher degree of sophistication in its influence activity, including experimenting with generative AI. TikTok accounts run by a PRC propaganda arm reportedly targeted candidates from both political parties during the U.S. midterm election cycle in 2022.
- Beijing is intensifying efforts to mold U.S. public discourse—particularly on core sovereignty issues, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The PRC monitors Chinese students abroad for dissident views and mobilizes Chinese student associations to conduct activities on behalf of Beijing, and seeks to influence research by U.S. academics and think tank experts.

IRAN

Iran will continue to conduct malign influence operations in the Middle East and in other regions, including trying to undermine U.S. political processes and amplify discord.

- Ahead of the U.S. election in 2024, Iran may attempt to conduct influence operations aimed at U.S. interests, including targeting U.S. elections, having demonstrated a willingness and capability to do so in the past.
- During the U.S. election cycle in 2020, Iranian cyber actors obtained or attempted to obtain U.S. voter information, sent threatening emails to voters, and disseminated disinformation about the election. The same Iranian actors have evolved their activities and developed a new set of techniques, combining cyber and influence capabilities, that Iran could deploy during the U.S. election cycle in 2024.

What is the Foreign Malign Influence Center?

The Foreign Malign Influence Center (FMIC) within ODNI is focused on mitigating the malign influence efforts of foreign governments and non-state actors, such as criminal or terrorist groups, or those that act on their behalf to subvert U.S. interests. FMIC serves as the lead U.S. Government organization for integrating intelligence pertaining to FMI. When appropriate, FMIC exposes the malign influence efforts of foreign actors so U.S. citizens can know about foreign activities targeting the United States. FMIC addresses foreign actions and activities—it does not evaluate the truth of foreign malign actors' messaging. In all of its lines of effort, FMIC supports the exercise of free speech and information-sharing in the marketplace of ideas, as the rights of all U.S. Persons to free expression and privacy are integral.



How Can You Learn More About the FMI Threat?

FMI efforts against our democratic institutions and processes are evolving. FMI actors have targeted elections, academic institutions, the economy, and our information environment. These efforts to influence how we vote, choose our leaders, and use news and information online to make decisions pose a fundamental threat to our democracy.

Agencies and departments across the federal government partner to provide information to the American public about the nature and scope of foreign influence efforts, including the threat from FMI.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (FBI)

The FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force is responsible for identifying and countering FMI operations targeting the U.S. and American citizens.

- Check out FBI's [Combating Foreign Influence website](#) for an FMI video library.

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE (ODNI)

ODNI's National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) is dedicated to raising awareness about foreign intelligence threats, their potential impact, and how individuals and organizations can mitigate those threats.

- Check out NCSC awareness materials on [sound cyber hygiene and social media practices](#).

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (DHS)

The DHS, through the Office of Intelligence & Analysis and the Cyber Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), helps the American public understand the risks from FMI operations and how to reduce the impact on organizations and communities.

- Check out CISA materials on [foreign influence operations and disinformation](#), and [The War on Pineapple: Understanding Foreign Interference in 5 Steps](#).