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Author: Hoselton, Liam. P.S.

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THE (DIS)CONTINUITIES OF COUNTER-TERRORISM IN RESPONSES TO FOREIGN INTERFERENCE: EVIDENCE FROM NEW ZEALAND AND CANADA

Liam P. S. Hoselton¹

For the last twenty-five years, counter-terrorism has occupied a central role in the organisation of national security governance across many Western liberal democracies. While terrorism has not disappeared, intensifying concerns regarding geostrategic competition and hostile state activity have begun to recalibrate established threat hierarchies and institutional priorities. Foreign interference has emerged as a central organising concern in this evolving security landscape. Despite its distinctive characteristics, available evidence suggests that foreign interference is sometimes addressed using resources, networks, practices, and lessons developed in counter-terrorism contexts. Drawing on an assemblage-based framework attentive to logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices, this article uses a comparative analysis of New Zealand and Canada to explain how and why elements of counter-terrorism configurations are continued, adapted, or differentiated in emerging responses to foreign interference. It argues that these outcomes reflect contested institutional development rather than natural policy evolution. Primary and secondary data suggest that continuity is most likely where foreign interference has lower epistemic salience, limited dedicated resources, and is absorbed into existing counter-terrorism infrastructures; adaptation where inherited infrastructures prove malleable to reconfiguration and are supported by epistemic salience; and differentiation where foreign interference gains sufficient salience, resources, and institutional support to justify more specialised approaches.

¹ Liam Hoselton is a PhD Candidate in Defence and Security Studies at Massey University. His research examines the effects of national security responses to foreign interference in multicultural liberal democracies. He has contributed a chapter to the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Gray Zone Conflicts and made public submissions on foreign interference legislation in Canada and New Zealand. His research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Massey University. The views expressed here are entirely his own. Correspondence may be addressed through the Managing Editor of the *National Security Journal* at j.m.battersby@massey.ac.nz.

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Introduction

The national security architectures of Western liberal democracies are in a state of flux. For much of the last twenty-five years, counter-terrorism has occupied a central role in the organisation of national security governance. The events of 9/11, the “Global War on Terror”, and subsequent terrorist attacks across the world contributed to the development of an expansive global counter-terrorism apparatus, including the extension of powers, authorities, and capabilities through new and expanded laws, surveillance practices, intelligence and policing functions, interagency coordination mechanisms, and community engagement initiatives.¹ While the threat of terrorism has not disappeared, intensifying concerns regarding geostrategic competition and hostile state activity have begun to recalibrate established threat hierarchies and institutional priorities.² Foreign interference has emerged as a central organising concern in this evolving security landscape.³

While foreign interference is an essentially contested term with no universally accepted definition, this article proposes a working definition based on the extant academic literature. Here, foreign interference is defined as *an array of activities thought to be undertaken or directed by an external actor, often involving a proxy, with the real or perceived intent to harm a target’s interests, values, norms, processes, relationships, institutions, capacities or capabilities*.⁴ Foreign interference is commonly associated with activities such as political interference, information influence operations, economic coercion, transnational repression, lawfare, and state-sponsored violence, among others.⁵ Although foreign interference is not new, advancements in technology, growing economic interdependence, and increased cross-border mobility have greatly expanded the range of vulnerabilities open to exploitation by adversarial actors, while lowering the costs and risks associated with such conduct.⁶ Several liberal democracies now warn that they face unprecedented levels of foreign interference, giving the issue renewed urgency.⁷

Despite its growing prominence, emerging evidence suggests that many of the resources, networks, practices, and lessons developed in counter-terrorism contexts are being redeployed to address foreign interference.⁸ While government reports and academic literature increasingly acknowledge this redeployment, they rarely question why it is occurring or what its implications are for foreign interference responses. This influence matters because it can shape how foreign interference is understood, which institutions are given authority, where resources are directed, and how the problem is treated in

practice. Using primary and secondary data, this article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of New Zealand and Canada. Applying an assemblage-based lens attentive to logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices, the article examines how and why configurations associated with counter-terrorism are reproduced, adapted, or differentiated in emerging counter-foreign interference responses.

The central argument is that the continuity, adaptation and differentiation of counter-terrorism approaches in foreign interference responses are best understood as a contested process of institutional development rather than a natural evolution of security policy.⁹ Continuity occurred where foreign interference had lower public and epistemic salience than terrorism, dedicated resources were limited, and established counter-terrorism infrastructures were expanded to absorb new responsibilities. Adaptation occurred where foreign interference had greater salience and inherited infrastructures were malleable enough to be reoriented. Differentiation occurred where foreign interference achieved high public and epistemic salience, dedicated resourcing was made available, and new infrastructures could be developed and justified. These outcomes did not emerge naturally. They reflected internal deliberations and struggles over which problems matter, where authority should reside, how resources should be allocated, and which practices should endure. These findings matter because they suggest that elements of counter-terrorism configurations may persist, not because they are particularly well suited to addressing the issues of foreign interference, but through processes of resistance, competition, and politicisation.

The article begins by introducing its assemblage-based framework and methodology. Logics, infrastructures, resources and practices are defined in the analysis subsection of the methodology. The article then traces the contemporary emergence of foreign interference as a national security concern in New Zealand and Canada, before examining purposively selected vignettes of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation of counter-terrorism configurations in foreign interference responses. It then brings the two cases together through a comparative synthesis attentive to logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the findings and their implications.

Theoretical framework: an assemblage-based approach

This article uses assemblage theory to conceptualise continuities, adaptations and differentiations of counter-terrorism approaches in emerging foreign interference responses. Assemblage theory is employed here as a conceptual and analytical lens, drawing on its emphasis on relationality, contingency, and the politics of configuration. It is not advanced as a comprehensive social ontology or totalising account of social order. Rather, the approach selectively mobilises and expands upon assemblage concepts to illuminate why certain configurations are continued, adapted or displaced across security domains.

At its core, assemblage theory rejects explanations that rely on fixed structures, unified systems, or essential properties. Instead, it understands social phenomena as provisional configurations of diverse material and non-material elements, such as people, ideas, objects, practices, and types of knowledge, whose form and effects emerge through relations rather than from any single organising principle.¹⁰ This relational view of social phenomena rests on the principle of *exteriority*, which suggests that the elements making up an assemblage are not defined by the assemblage itself and retain independence.¹¹ Components can be added, removed, modified, or recombined in different ways, producing changes in how an assemblage is configured and how it operates. Assemblages are therefore inherently open-ended, dynamic and unstable. They are continuously shaped through processes of stabilisation and destabilisation, as relations between elements are entrenched, loosened, or transformed in different contexts over time.¹²

Territories demarcate the relational fields within which assemblages are stabilised, destabilised, and reconfigured over time. They do not exist as fixed containers, but as patterned and provisional domains that acquire coherence through the alignment of meanings, practices, and forms of authority. Territories emerge where configurations of relations become sufficiently stabilised to structure action and interpretation, even as they remain open to contestation and transformation. In the context of this study, territories are used to refer to specific national security domains organised around addressing distinctive *problematiques*; that is, the complex and interconnected series of perceived and real insecurities through which a domain derives its meaning, purpose, and governing logics.¹³ Territories are leveraged as analytical tools for understanding the socially produced and open-ended fields within which actors interact, align, and compete to configure assemblages. Counter-terrorism and counter-foreign interference are treated here as distinct national security territories whose assemblage configurations are centred on different, though at times overlapping, *problematiques*.

The *problematique of counter-terrorism* centres on the identification, disruption, and prevention of ideologically motivated violence, including processes of radicalisation, recruitment, and mobilisation that may culminate in acts of terrorism. It is primarily oriented toward mitigating the risk of imminent or catastrophic harm to public safety and national security.¹⁴ The *problematique of counter-foreign interference* centres on the identification, attribution, and disruption of covert, deceptive, or coercive activities undertaken by, or on behalf of, external actors to influence domestic political, economic, or social processes.¹⁵ It is primarily oriented toward safeguarding national interests, political institutions, state sovereignty and self-determination, social norms and values, and community safety from the corrosive effects of what is deemed as illegitimate or harmful outside influence.

Although counter-terrorism and counter-foreign interference remain largely distinct security domains, they converge in several important areas. State-sponsored violence provides the clearest point of connection, as adversarial actors may use, support, or enable terrorist entities to advance their interests within a targeted society.¹⁶ Transnational repression connects these domains differently, as adversarial actors may exploit counter-terrorism laws, bureaucratic processes, or multilateral institutions to target individuals and communities abroad.¹⁷ Information influence operations may also contribute to conditions that increase the likelihood of radicalisation, political violence, intergroup hostility, or extremist mobilisation.¹⁸ It is at these key sites that the boundaries between counter-foreign interference and counter-terrorism become most ambiguous, creating opportunities for interaction between otherwise distinct security territories.

Interactions between territories are significant because they can unsettle established assemblage configurations, as relations among their underlying elements are loosened or reworked. Elements associated with one security territory may then move into another and become reterritorialised in new ways.¹⁹ This movement matters because transferred elements may shift in meaning, function, or effect. As a result, they may become misaligned with the problematique of the new territory, altering how the threat is perceived, governed, or treated.

Methodology

Case Selection

This article adopts a comparative case study design to examine how and why counter-terrorism assemblage configurations are continued, adapted, or differentiated in New Zealand and Canada's responses to foreign interference.²⁰ These countries are two closely connected multicultural liberal democracies with shared histories, similar Westminster-based political institutions, and longstanding national security and intelligence ties.²¹ In both cases, foreign interference has emerged as a competing priority within national security systems long shaped by counter-terrorism. At the same time, the two countries display meaningful differences in their approaches to foreign interference, shaped by their respective geographic and geopolitical positions, institutional capacities, demographic compositions, and national priorities.²² Together, these similarities and differences provide a strong basis for comparing continuities, adaptations, and differentiations in how counter-foreign interference responses are developing across the two cases.

The focus on Canada and New Zealand necessarily excludes other relevant cases, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands, among others, where similar dynamics are emerging.²³ These cases are left for future research so that the article can maximise the analytical value of the available primary data.

Data

The analysis draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes a preliminary analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted for a related study on the societal effects of national security responses to foreign interference in multicultural liberal democracies. Participants included security professionals, defined as current or former public servants with occupational responsibilities related to addressing foreign interference, and members of the Chinese diaspora, defined as individuals who self-identified as having ancestral ties to mainland China. These groups were selected to provide insight into how responses are perceived and experienced by those involved in their implementation and by communities often positioned at the centre of contemporary foreign interference narratives.

The interview data was collected with the approval of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. The New Zealand interviews were conducted between September and December 2025, while the Canadian interviews were conducted between December 2025 and January 2026. These dates are presented to clarify when the data was collected, as changes may have occurred since participants made their statements. To preserve the integrity of the ongoing research, exact sample sizes are not stated at this stage.

Secondary sources, including government documents, academic literature, and non-governmental reports, are used to situate the primary data within a richer empirical account of foreign interference responses in New Zealand and Canada.

Analysis

The analysis unfolds in three parts. The first section presents structured narratives of New Zealand and Canada's contemporary experiences with foreign interference, showing how the issue became publicly and epistemically salient as a national security concern. These narratives offer insight into how counter-foreign interference has stabilised as a distinct security territory within both countries' national security architectures.

The second section provides purposively selected examples of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation in how counter-terrorism approaches are used in foreign interference responses. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of New Zealand or Canada's foreign interference or counter-terrorism frameworks, or of all the ways these domains shape one another. Rather, the analysis focuses on moments where the consideration of counter-terrorism approaches became especially visible in the development of counter-foreign interference responses, allowing the article to explain how continuity, adaptation, and differentiation occur.

The final section synthesises the two cases through an assemblage-based analytical lens, comparing how logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices shape processes of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation across counter-terrorism and counter-foreign

interference territories. *Logics* refer to the problem framings, threat assumptions, and justificatory narratives that render particular security responses intelligible and legitimate within a given territory, shaping how harms are defined, prioritised, and acted upon. *Infrastructures* denote the institutional, organisational, and networked arrangements through which those logics are operationalised, including agencies, coordination mechanisms, community and professional networks, and information-sharing systems. *Resources* encompass the material and symbolic assets, such as funding, staffing, expertise, institutional authority, and legitimacy, that enable configurations to endure, expand, and influence what is valued and sought after. *Practices* refer to the routine activities through which security governance is enacted in everyday operation, translating logics into action through investigative procedures, enforcement actions, training, coordination, and other forms of implementation. These dimensions function as heuristic entry points that allow the study to trace processes of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation across security territories and to present an explanation for why they are occurring based on the empirical evidence.

The experiences of foreign interference in New Zealand and Canada

The empirical analysis first traces how foreign interference emerged, became known, and stabilised as a distinctive contemporary national security concern in New Zealand and Canada.

For New Zealand, a pivotal moment in the contemporary public profile of foreign interference came with the publication of Anne-Marie Brady's 2017 report, *Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping*, which raised allegations about the actors, institutions, and tactics involved in United Front Work Department operations in New Zealand.²⁴ While concerns about foreign interference had been recognised by the New Zealand government several years earlier, Brady's report contributed to greater public debate, media scrutiny, and political attention around the issue. High-profile allegations involving sitting Members of Parliament with previously undisclosed links to the Chinese Communist Party fostered intense public debate related to the vulnerability of New Zealand's political system and elite capture.²⁵

Foreign interference remained a prominent issue in New Zealand politics due to allegations of transnational repression targeting diaspora communities and critics of authoritarian regimes. Since 2023, the New Zealand government has sought to shed greater light on instances like these through public reporting, official statements, and anonymised case studies that illustrate the nature, scope, and impacts of foreign interference activities in New Zealand.²⁶ Several high-profile allegations of transnational repression were explored in Paula Penfold and Louisa Cleave's 2024 documentary, *The Long Game*, which contributed to wider public awareness of foreign interference as an issue.²⁷

In a 2024 speech, Director-General of the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS), Andrew Hampton, stated that countering violent extremism and terrorism continued to occupy around half of the Service's investigative time, "with the remainder dominated by foreign interference and espionage."²⁸ This statement underscores the growing centrality of foreign interference within New Zealand's national security agenda, while also showing that counter-terrorism remains a major institutional priority. Since at least 2022, the government has advanced a coordinated cross-government work programme on foreign interference, introducing legislative and policy reforms, public communication initiatives, and outreach efforts aimed at safeguarding democratic processes and strengthening national resilience.²⁹ This included the enactment of the *Crimes (Countering Foreign Interference) Amendment Act 2025*, which introduced several new criminal offences specific to foreign interference. Many of these developments unfolded while New Zealand was implementing major changes to its counter-terrorism architecture following recommendations from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques (hereafter the Royal Commission of Inquiry).³⁰ As a result, New Zealand's contemporary foreign interference concerns and responses emerged alongside, rather than apart from, a broader recalibration of national security institutions, community engagement practices, and social cohesion initiatives that was being shaped by counter-terrorism.

Canada has had a different experience. While Canada is no stranger to foreign interference, public concern regarding hostile state activity was heightened by the 2018 detentions of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor by authorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC).³¹ The arrests, which followed the detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada pursuant to a United States extradition request, generated extensive public attention and media coverage. In the Canadian media, the arrests of Kovrig and Spavor were frequently framed as a "kidnapping" or an example of "hostage diplomacy", contributing to a broader foreign interference narrative in which foreign states were understood as willing to exert coercive pressure on Canada and its citizens to advance strategic objectives. Public interest remained high in the case until the release of all parties in September 2021.

Around the same time, then Canadian Security Intelligence Service's (CSIS) Director David Vigneault stated in a 2018 speech that while terrorism remained the primary threat to public safety, foreign interference and espionage had become the greatest threats to Canada's prosperity and national interests.³² Two years later, in 2020, CSIS reported that espionage and foreign interference activity had reached levels not seen since the Cold War.³³ This official framing was reinforced by several high-profile investigations and allegations involving research security, economic espionage, and alleged overseas police stations during this period.³⁴ While not all these cases constituted foreign interference, their public visibility contributed to a broader political narrative that portrayed espionage and interference as being on the rise.

In late 2022 and early 2023, CSIS intelligence leaks alleging PRC interference in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections intensified public and parliamentary pressure for transparency. In response, the government appointed former Governor General David Johnston as an Independent Special Rapporteur to investigate the allegations. Johnston initially concluded that a public inquiry was not necessary; however, following sustained criticism of both his process and perceived lack of independence, he resigned.³⁵ The government subsequently established the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions (hereafter the Hogue Inquiry), led by Justice Marie-Josée Hogue. The Hogue Inquiry fostered greater government transparency regarding the extent to which foreign interference was impacting Canadian society.³⁶

During the Hogue Inquiry, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians produced a parallel report alleging that some parliamentarians had wittingly or semi-wittingly engaged in foreign interference, stirring up significant controversy.³⁷ Justice Hogue rejected the claim that there were “traitors” in Parliament, concluding that the evidence presented to the Inquiry did not support such a claim.³⁸

The public salience of foreign interference was further intensified in September 2023, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that Canadian authorities were investigating credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the Government of India and the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia.³⁹

Amid public scrutiny, Parliament enacted *Bill C-70*, which amended several laws and introduced new measures to address foreign interference. These reforms were part of a broader evolution in Canada’s national security architecture that had been developing since at least 2016.⁴⁰ In 2026, concerns about foreign interference have expanded into new areas of Canadian political life, including debates surrounding proposals for an Alberta independence referendum. Several scholars, researchers, and commentators alleged that external actors, namely the United States and Russia, have sought to amplify existing political and social divisions associated with the issue to undermine Canada’s national unity.⁴¹

These trajectories provide the background for the analysis that follows. In New Zealand, foreign interference was stabilised through an episodic process of disclosures that unfolded alongside post-Christchurch counter-terrorism reforms. In Canada, by contrast, foreign interference was stabilised through a more sustained sequence of political crises and high-profile government responses.

Examples of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation

The second part of the analysis examines selected examples of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation in how counter-terrorism approaches have shaped emerging count-

er-foreign interference responses. While not exhaustive, these examples are intended to show how such processes occur in practice.

New Zealand: Continuity, constraint, and partial differentiation

New Zealand's counter-foreign interference response displays strong continuities and adaptations of counter-terrorism approaches. New Zealand Police (NZP) provide a clear illustration of these dynamics. Several New Zealand security professionals who were interviewed indicated that the remit of the NZP had been expanded in recent years to include enforcement and investigative responsibilities for criminal offences related to foreign interference. These changes have included dedicated foreign interference training modules mandatory for all staff. They also suggested that many of these changes took place before the enactment of the *Crimes (Countering Foreign Interference) Amendment Act 2025*, and that the NZP's approach to foreign interference remained largely in development at the time of the interviews.

Within the NZP, the National Security Group (NSG) holds primary responsibility for foreign interference. This team was first established as the Special Investigations Group in 2004 to address growing concerns related to terrorism following 9/11. Today, the NSG oversees several National Security Investigation Teams, many of which still retain counter-terrorism responsibilities. Evidence suggests that the NSG has previously struggled to secure adequate resourcing. This issue was flagged in reporting from the Royal Commission of Inquiry, which cited claims that the team's counter-terrorism "workload was 'do-able', but a 'stretch'."⁴² The Inquiry further noted that the unit frequently had to draw upon other policing resources to meet its counter-terrorism remit and prioritise cases according to the scale and immediacy of the threat they posed.

The addition of foreign interference to the NSG's mandate appears to have only deepened these pre-existing resource pressures. One New Zealand security professional indicated that despite foreign interference being elevated as a priority at the NZP, there had been "... no [additional] resources provided to police in terms of countering foreign interference at all. Everything that [the New Zealand Police] put[s] into it at the moment comes at a cost to other crime and particularly our counterterrorism response, which is quite significant."⁴³

A complementary issue facing the NZP is how foreign interference comes to be recognised as a threat that justifies investigative resourcing. Triaging operates as an internal filtering mechanism, determining which incoming signals are escalated to full investigation and which remain at the level of monitoring or are deprioritised altogether. Where the evaluative criteria embedded within that system are derived from counter-terrorism frameworks, prioritising imminence, demonstrable intent, and indicators of violence, foreign interference leads may struggle to meet escalation thresholds. One participant suggested:

... if a counter-terrorism investigation team's triage system is based on counter-terrorism leads, and that [triage system] is expected to do the national security [leads] as well, then none of the national security stuff is going to get through the triage system... if there's no violence angle to it, it's not going to get through that particular [system], or it's not going to do it in the way the system's intended to work...⁴⁴

A second New Zealand security professional articulated a related concern regarding evidentiary thresholds:

I think, look I'm certain, there's been ... foreign interference going on in [New Zealand] for some time but... I think the problem when we look at it through ... [a] law enforcement lens, when it actually becomes criminal, [there's] probably quite a lot of behaviour and activity taking place that doesn't reach that threshold or would struggle to get to an evidential threshold.⁴⁵

Beyond issues of resourcing and prioritisation, these perspectives raise important epistemological questions about foreign interference in New Zealand; that is, how foreign interference is made knowable and rendered actionable by New Zealand security professionals. When evaluative frameworks are anchored in counter-terrorism logics and criminal evidentiary thresholds, certain forms of activity may fail to register as security threats, not because they are absent, but because they do not conform to the criteria through which threats are traditionally made knowable. Where counter-terrorism represents an immediate threat and visible harm to public safety, the case for redirecting resources or recalibrating triage systems toward more ambiguous and gradual threats like foreign interference becomes difficult to make.

A third New Zealand security professional described the difference of working on these two issues through a sporting analogy:

Counter-terrorism is like being in overtime in a soccer game, and the next goal wins, so you can't concede... but being in kind of a counter-intelligence or kind of a foreign interference type role is more like being on defence in basketball. You know they are going to score some points against you. You just have to accept that some are going to get through. You're not going to stop everything.⁴⁶

The analogy underscores why counter-foreign interference work may sit uneasily within systems designed for counter-terrorism, as the two domains reflect very different orientations toward what constitutes a threat, harm, success, and tolerable risk.

Another area where the influence of counter-terrorism is palpable in New Zealand's counter-foreign interference approach is community engagement. Some security professionals noted that resourcing constraints had led to the reuse of existing counter-terrorism community networks. Another pointed to the social cohesion work that emerged from the Royal Commission of Inquiry, suggesting, "... that *same lens* was used to frame up the way that the New Zealand government should respond to foreign influence and interference."⁴⁷ This latter point is significant, as it suggests that foreign interference's emergence alongside post-Christchurch national security reforms has been consequential for the logics through which foreign interference came to be understood and treated in New Zealand.

These dynamics were reflected in accounts of the monthly Auckland Police meetings raised by several members of the Chinese diaspora interviewed. One participant explained the scope of these meetings, "It's a social cohesion meeting basically where ... on average about a hundred and twenty ethnic community leaders come together once a month, and the police invite people to talk about different subjects that affect ethnic communities."⁴⁸ These meetings are designed to raise awareness on a range of issues and foster engagement between the police and community representatives. However, some participants described varied experiences when foreign interference was discussed.

One participant stated that they had attended only once after receiving what they described as a "frosty reception," explaining that although there was no formal reason for exclusion, they felt that organisers "didn't really want me there," due to how outspoken they had become about foreign interference in their personal life.⁴⁹ Another participant reported feeling unsafe in such settings, citing personal suspicions that perpetrators of foreign interference may have been present in the audience, and indicated that they would prefer a format that allowed for anonymity.⁵⁰ A third participant noted that at open format meetings of this kind, "some people get sort of, not scared, but turned off by talking about foreign interference or those sort of security-type, geopolitical-type matters." They suggested that there are concerns among parts of the community about who participates in similar open-format meetings due to suspicions about undisclosed links to external governments.⁵¹ These accounts suggest that meeting formats need careful consideration in foreign interference contexts, especially where concerns about exposure, monitoring, retaliation, and mistrust may limit or make participation unsafe.

These issues help explain the significance of more targeted foreign interference engagement through the Ministry for Ethnic Communities (MEC), now New Zealand's lead agency for foreign interference-related community engagement.⁵² Established following recommendations from the Royal Commission of Inquiry and evolving from the former Office of Ethnic Affairs, MEC is engaging selected ethnic communities to assess the impacts of foreign interference, strengthen resilience, build government-community relationships, and enhance public sector capability. Budget 2023 allocated \$2.25 million annually for four years to support this work through the Ministry's Security and

Resilience Team.⁵³ The initiative aims to improve the government's evidence base on community experiences while increasing awareness and reporting capacity. This suggests that, although resources remain constrained in some areas, targeted investment has enabled more differentiated approaches to emerge. Critically, this institutional arrangement also situates a substantial part of New Zealand's counter-foreign interference response within a ministry oriented toward ethnic community engagement, relationship-building, and social cohesion, rather than primarily within law enforcement or intelligence institutions, which is quite different from many other countries.

Canada: Differentiation, adaptation and the transfer of expertise

Canada's counter-foreign interference response displays a more mixed pattern of differentiation, adaptation, and continuity with counter-terrorism approaches. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service's (CSIS) Academic Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement (AOSE) team reflects an effort to detach community engagement from earlier counter-terrorism configurations. Originally launched as the Academic Outreach Programme in 2008, it was expanded in 2019 to support broader stakeholder engagement with civil society, diaspora, Indigenous, advocacy, and private-sector partners. In testimony before the Hogue Inquiry, René Ouellette, CSIS' Director General of Academic Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement, explained that the AOSE was intended to provide an alternative point of contact with CSIS, so that individuals' first interaction would not be with an intelligence officer collecting information. It also sought to, "address concerns from community organizations regarding some approaches that were taken in the context of [counter-terrorism] operations," reflecting recognition of overreach and insensitivity in some post-9/11 security work.⁵⁴

This redesign is significant in foreign interference settings, where engagement must account for distrust, fear of retaliation, intra-community dynamics, and prior experiences with security services in both ancestral homelands and Canada. Rather than applying a uniform model, the AOSE undertakes preparatory research to ensure outreach is contextually appropriate and responsive to community-specific concerns. Evidence of this approach can be seen in recent foreign interference-related town halls, which participants indicated had been organised in several Canadian cities by early 2026. These sessions were reportedly structured around pre-vetted participants and discretionary Chatham House Rule conditions to encourage candid discussion while mitigating risks to those involved.⁵⁵ While the internal contents of these meetings remain closed, they suggest that a distinctive community engagement approach for foreign interference is emerging in Canada.

In other areas, community engagement infrastructure originally developed in counter-terrorism contexts is being reused, such as Public Safety Canada's Cross-Cultural Roundtable on Security, which was established in 2004 to facilitate dialogue between government and community representatives following 9/11.⁵⁶ While the Roundtable

continues to serve as a consultative mechanism on national security issues, including terrorism and foreign interference, its rotational membership model allows different community leaders and subject-matter experts to be brought in as priorities shift. This design enables continuity in institutional form while permitting recalibration of expertise and purpose.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) has also begun restructuring its foreign interference capacity, most visibly through the establishment of the Foreign Actor Interference Team (FAIT) in 2020. Initially created without dedicated funding, FAIT drew on resources from other national security priority areas, an arrangement the RCMP later described as unsustainable. The Government of Canada addressed this in 2023 by allocating \$48.9 million to stabilise FAIT as a more permanent counter-foreign interference function in the RCMP.⁵⁷ At the same time, participants indicated that the development of the RCMP's counter-foreign interference capabilities had drawn upon counter-terrorism resources and personnel. Participants raised differing perspectives on the suitability of these transfers, particularly regarding the forms of expertise, contextual understanding, and community knowledge required for foreign interference work. In the words of one Canadian security professional:

...if you look at the RCMP and INSETs [Integrated National Security Enforcement Teams], the INSETs have been entities that have worked primarily on counter-terrorism for many years, and now you make those investigators and analysts and people work on foreign interference, and they don't have the tools and the understanding to work on that, unlike CSIS. CSIS has been working for decades... on foreign interference with lesser and bigger resources, depending on the priorities, but it always has been part of the DNA. So [CSIS] know[s] the people in the community, they know how it works, they know the actors, so they're good at understanding foreign interference and documenting it, but whenever those files get turned into the RCMP, and I've witnessed that... the investigators, although they're good, they are well-intentioned, they don't understand the reality. They don't understand the nuances. They don't understand the communities...⁵⁸

Another participant recalled an agenda-setting meeting about the RCMP's strategic priorities in which they argued that foreign interference had become "the primary threat" facing Canada and was "existential in nature and not kinetic."⁵⁹ According to the participant, several attendees struggled to see foreign interference as a policing priority when compared with problems such as terrorism:

And, you know, I got serious pushback from the police officers in the room who thought I was speaking a different language, who thought that it was crazy to think that we would divert police resources to deal with something as kind of ephemeral as foreign interference when they were dealing with dead bodies.⁶⁰

The participant suggested that some of these perspectives likely emerged from the socialisation of junior police officers, "... who start their careers on the front lines, giving traffic tickets and breaking up bar fights..." and the subsequent tasking of those who are promoted into federal policing to deal with intangible threats from, "state-based adversaries who are applying... very sophisticated tradecraft to undermine Canada's national interest." For others, it may very well be that they were socialised in counter-terrorism contexts and transferred into counter-foreign interference work.⁶¹ The participant noted that there had been some resistance among counter-terrorism professionals and teams tasked with working on foreign interference, suggesting that it was not where they wanted to "put the emphasis". Some, they suggested, wanted to "go back to 9/11," to "go back to terrorism," and to return to the "original marching orders..." of the INSETs.⁶²

A more sympathetic perspective presented the reliance on counter-terrorism personnel as a pragmatic response to resource constraints. From this perspective, although the arrangement was not ideal, the development of dedicated counter-foreign interference career pathways would gradually build the relevant knowledge and skills.⁶³ Indeed, the RCMP is increasingly receiving training on foreign interference-related issues, including the dynamics of specific communities and transnational repression.⁶⁴

The reuse of security practices developed in counter-terrorism contexts can also shape how foreign interference responses are experienced by affected communities. One security professional criticised highly visible policing in some diaspora communities as resembling counter-terrorism-style community policing: "the RCMP sent police officers fully uniformed in the Chinese community, [to] make their rounds and try to have a presence, [as though] it was Kandahar and you would send Canadian soldiers with uniforms to win the hearts and minds. That's not how the Chinese community works."⁶⁵ Illustrating this friction, a member of the Chinese diaspora in Montreal described what to them felt like a "witch hunt":

... the RCMP... parked their mobile van, which is a huge bus, it's a monster bus, in the heart of Chinatown. And they had about half a dozen to eight agents walking through Chinatown, passing out a card with their telephone number, asking for information, asking if they had been threatened by Chinese agents, [or] whether they had been approached by a Chinese agent.⁶⁶

When asked about the scale of the RCMP presence, the participant suggested that the “...[RCMP] want[ed] to make it obvious that they are there watching. Watching everybody.” They connected this to earlier histories of policing and discrimination in Chinese Canadian communities, likening it to the “RCMP immigration raids in the 60s, when they swooped down on all of Chinatown, all the Chinatowns in Canada, trying to catch illegal immigrants.”⁶⁷

Importantly, this is one account from a single individual and is not necessarily reflective of views held across broader Chinese Canadian communities or other diasporas affected by foreign interference. The Hogue Inquiry’s public consultations drew on a much wider body of public input, including in-person testimony from 105 members of various diaspora communities, more than 200 written submissions, and 624 questionnaire responses.⁶⁸ These consultations revealed mixed experiences with Canadian police and security agencies. Some respondents reported feeling dismissed, misunderstood, or inadequately protected when they sought assistance. Others expressed frustration that authorities were not doing enough to intervene, protect affected communities, or respond visibly to threats. Still others warned of the risks of racial profiling, the negative impacts of investigations on community resources, and fears among diaspora members of being securitised or prosecuted. Taken together, these accounts suggest that visible policing may reassure some community members by signalling protection and government action, while others may view the same presence as a source of concern.

Public Safety Canada has acknowledged visible policing as a deterrence tool, noting that the RCMP has used marked vehicles outside locations “believed to be” involved in monitoring diaspora communities or coercing individuals to return to their country of origin, and that these interventions were achieving their “intended deterrent effect.”⁶⁹ This raises questions about how such sites are identified, what evidence is required for an intervention to take place, and how deterrence is measured. The absence of observable activity after an intervention does not necessarily mean that foreign interference has been deterred, as activity may be displaced, adapted, or made less visible. It may also reflect changes in the behaviour of law-abiding community members who avoid certain locations, organisations, or events following a visible security intervention.

These concerns are especially important in communities affected by transnational repression, where relationships with police and intelligence agencies may already be shaped by fear, distrust, or prior experiences of state repression. Former CSIS Director Richard Fadden suggested during the Hogue Inquiry that members of some diaspora communities come from countries where “dealing with the police or the security services is the last thing they want to do,” even when they are threatened and want assistance.⁷⁰ These anxieties may be intensified where adversarial actors attempt to portray victims of transnational repression as criminals or terrorists to co-opt security services in the society of residence. One Canadian security professional described receiving such reports from foreign authorities in the hope that Canadian officials would “go af-

ter” the individuals concerned. They reflected on the anxiety someone in this situation might feel when deciding whether to seek help:

... am I going to be persecuted or arrested by the police or intelligence force because my country of origin thinks I’m a criminal or a terrorist... And maybe [my country of origin is] sharing that information to the RCMP, and I might go knock on their door [to receive help], and I’ll be arrested because there’s ... an Interpol notice on me.⁷¹

These examples suggest that responses to foreign interference are experienced unevenly and must be carefully constructed to maximise protection while minimising harm. The issue is not simply whether a tactic “works,” but for whom it works, how its effects are measured, and whether it strengthens or weakens the trust needed for effective reporting, protection, and community engagement.

Comparison and synthesis: logics, infrastructures, resources and practices

This section brings together the empirical evidence presented in the Canada and New Zealand case studies through an assemblage-based analysis attentive to logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices. In doing so, it develops an evidence-based explanation for the conditions under which continuity, adaptation, and differentiation are more likely to occur.

Comparison

Beginning with logics, New Zealand and Canada display meaningful differences in how foreign interference has come to be known as a source of insecurity. In Canada, foreign interference has been made knowable through an enduring stream of public controversies, intelligence leaks, parliamentary scrutiny, public inquiry evidence, legislative reform, and diplomatic crises.⁷² These developments have generated a dense evidentiary and political record through which foreign interference has become intelligible as a persistent, systemic, and increasingly existential national security problem. In New Zealand, by contrast, foreign interference has emerged through a quieter and more episodic process, shaped by fewer public controversies, selective threat disclosures, anonymised case studies, and recent legislative reforms.⁷³ These developments unfolded alongside major acts of public violence, most notably the Christchurch mosque shootings and the LynnMall attack, as well as significant post-Christchurch national security reforms that kept terrorism highly visible in public and institutional life.⁷⁴ These epistemological differences matter because they shape whether foreign interference is stabilised as a distinctive national security territory; the degree of public and political pressure for government action; the authority afforded to institutions seeking to redirect resources from established priorities such as counter-terrorism; and the operating assumptions through which responses are developed.

Across the two cases, foreign interference responses exhibit varying degrees of infrastructural adaptation and differentiation. In New Zealand, foreign interference responsibilities have been layered onto police national security structures that retain counter-terrorism responsibilities, particularly the NSG and associated investigative teams. Police-led social cohesion meetings similarly reflect adaptation, as existing community engagement forums have been repurposed to address foreign interference. The strongest infrastructural differentiation appears to be occurring through the MEC, which, despite its post-Christchurch origins, is developing a more distinctive counter-foreign interference community engagement approach.

Canada shows greater infrastructural differentiation, particularly through CSIS's AOSE, the RCMP's FAIT, and more specialised foreign interference engagement forums. Yet Canada also demonstrates infrastructural continuity and adaptation, including the continued use of consultative mechanisms first developed in response to terrorism, such as the Cross-Cultural Roundtable on Security, and policing structures whose personnel pathways and expertise remain shaped by earlier national security priorities.

These infrastructural differences matter because they shape not only which teams and forums are used, but also which actors have authority to define foreign interference, allocate resources, and determine appropriate forms of intervention. In practice, this can affect whether foreign interference concerns are elevated, deprioritised, or filtered through decision-making systems still oriented toward counter-terrorism. In both cases, participants described foreign interference concerns being resisted within police decision-making hierarchies where counter-terrorism maintained greater salience among those with authority.

Resources were central to the continuity, adaptation, and differentiation of counter-terrorism approaches in counter-foreign interference responses. In both cases, funding constraints shaped how foreign interference capabilities developed. In Canada, the FAIT was initially established without dedicated funding and drew resources from other national security areas. This was possible because foreign interference had acquired sufficient salience to justify short-term reprioritisation, but dedicated funding was ultimately required for the function to stabilise within the RCMP. In New Zealand, by contrast, the absence of dedicated resources for law enforcement appears to have reinforced continuities with counter-terrorism, as foreign interference responsibilities were added to police national security structures that had prior resources shortages, making the viability of drawing further resources from elsewhere unlikely.

Resource scarcities also involved the distribution of skills and knowledge. This was particularly evident in Canada, where participants suggested that CSIS possessed deeper institutional knowledge of foreign interference than agencies such as the RCMP, which had to retask personnel trained and socialised in other national security territories, particularly counter-terrorism. While this transfer was not uncontested, participants

also suggested that many staff were earnestly trying to develop the knowledge required for foreign interference work. The challenge is that such expertise takes time to build, meaning inherited counter-terrorism approaches may endure while more specialised foreign interference capabilities are still being developed.

Where dedicated resources were made available, as with the MEC, more differentiated approaches have begun to emerge. This raises questions about how resources are distributed across the infrastructures that support New Zealand's counter-foreign interference response, and whether law enforcement capabilities are being sufficiently supported alongside community engagement, public awareness, and knowledge-building functions.

The two cases further show that practices inherited from counter-terrorism can produce uneven effects when applied to foreign interference. In New Zealand, participants suggested that the reuse of open-format community engagement forums, while well intentioned, was not always well suited to foreign interference discussions, particularly where attendees feared monitoring, exposure, or retaliation. In Canada, more tailored engagement practices have emerged through pre-vetted town halls and context-specific outreach. Yet community policing practices resembling those developed in counter-terrorism contexts also appear to have mixed effects, with some community members welcoming greater government intervention and others expressing concern.

These examples demonstrate that practices do not retain stable effects as they move across security territories. Their meaning and consequences change depending on the problematique to which they are attached. The question, then, is not simply whether inherited practices can be redeployed, but how they are reconfigured by the distinctive social and political dynamics of foreign interference, and what effects they produce in that context.

Synthesis

Bringing these factors together, the article develops the following explanatory frame for why continuities, adaptations and differentiations are likely to take place. Continuity was most likely where foreign interference had lower public and epistemic salience than terrorism, where dedicated resources were limited, and where existing counter-terrorism or national security infrastructures were expanded to absorb new foreign interference responsibilities. In these contexts, inherited logics, personnel pathways, triage systems, and community engagement practices tended to endure, often because authority remained with institutions and professionals whose expertise had been formed in counter-terrorism settings, and differentiation to foreign interference was difficult to justify. Adaptation occurred where existing arrangements could be reoriented without being fully displaced, allowing inherited infrastructures or practices to be modified in response to some of the distinctive demands of foreign interference. Differentiation

emerged where foreign interference acquired sufficient public, political, and institutional salience to justify dedicated investment, specialised expertise, and more tailored forms of engagement and intervention.

These movements did not occur automatically, nor did they occur because counter-terrorism approaches were naturally well suited to foreign interference. Rather, they reflected struggles over how foreign interference should be understood, who should lead the response, how resources should be allocated, and whether established counter-terrorism and national security arrangements should endure, be modified, or be displaced.

In neither case were continuity, adaptation, and differentiation mutually exclusive. Rather, they coexisted in shifting combinations across logics, infrastructures, resources, and practices. The influence of counter-terrorism on counter-foreign interference is therefore not binary, uniform, or complete, but varies across institutional and political contexts.

Conclusion

This research has shown that, as foreign interference has emerged as a distinctive national security territory in New Zealand and Canada, responses to it have been shaped, in part, through considerations of counter-terrorism approaches. This occurred through continuity and adaptation, including the reprioritisation of resources and personnel; the expansion of mandates; the persistence of social cohesion and prevention logics; the endurance of triage systems oriented toward the prevention of terrorism and violence; and the reuse of community engagement forums developed in counter-terrorism contexts. It also occurred through differentiation, including the development of dedicated foreign interference capabilities; specialised training; distinctive engagement approaches; and emerging career pathways.

The article has argued that processes of continuity, adaptation, and differentiation should be understood as contested forms of institutional development rather than natural policy evolution. In both cases, the development of counter-foreign interference responses involved resistance, negotiation, and competition over authority, networks, resources, institutional priorities, practices, and logics. Key determinants of continuity, adaptation and differentiation included the epistemic salience of foreign interference, public and political pressure, resourcing, decision-makers' orientations and socialisation, and the development or reuse of existing infrastructures. These processes were not mutually exclusive and often coexisted within the same national context.

These findings have several implications. First, counter-terrorism approaches may persist in foreign interference responses even when they are poorly suited to the problem, not because they are effective, but because of institutional dynamics, professional assumptions, and struggles over authority and resources. Greater epistemic salience may

create public and political pressure, making foreign interference easier to prioritise and resource. Second, the analysis points to gaps in knowledge, skills, and expertise relevant to foreign interference in certain institutions. Addressing these gaps requires treating counter-foreign interference as a specialised field, supported by dedicated career pathways, multidisciplinary teams, community-informed practice, and mechanisms for retaining expertise. Finally, the research shows that foreign interference responses are experienced unevenly by diaspora communities. This suggests that the effectiveness of counter-foreign interference efforts depends not only on detection, disruption, or deterrence, but also on how responses shape trust, reporting, protection, and engagement. Further research is needed to understand how these responses affect communities, and what this means for the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of counter-foreign interference practices.

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