October 1, 2016

**From:** Office of the President

**To:** National Security Council

**Re:** Request for Recommendations on Potential Foreign Interference in the 2016 US Elections

*Overview:*

The President requests the NSC to examine foreign interference in the 2016 elections, and to provide a set of recommendations about how best to best respond to them. The goal is to preserve the country’s democratic infrastructure, so that foreign governments do not directly or indirectly (i.e., manipulate) alter the public’s ability to select its own political leaders. The election is one month away, so the President needs your response fast.

*Background:*

As Election Day approaches in the United States in 2016, excitement reaches a fevered pitch. The presidential election seems like no other in memorable history. First and foremost, a political outsider, Donald Trump, has secured the Republican nomination. This happens rarely in American history. The last political outsider—defined as someone without high-level, political experience—to become president was Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952, and he had extensive military experience leading the Allied Forces against Hitler in World War II. Virtually no major candidate has lacked both *some* political *and* military experience. Second, Trump campaigns like no other, modern presidential candidate. Adept at social media use, Trump invites controversy, thrives on attention, and skillfully controls the narrative. He also prefers attaching opponents’ character (e.g., nicknames), as opposed to debating policy. This provides memorable soundbites as he attacks ‘the political establishment’ from outside of it. Finally, and most importantly for you, accusations of foreign interference in the election strengthen daily. As 2016 unfolded, foreign operatives associated with the Russian government—an association Russia denies—hacked the Democratic National Committee, as well as the Clinton campaign. They then released a trove of documents online, which then affected public opinion.

Our Administration faces a dilemma. On the one hand, we swore “to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” (5 U.S.C. § 3331). A presidential candidate like Donald Trump does not alone constitute a threat. Democratic elections ultimately belong to the voters, and they may freely elect any candidate of their choosing to serve as President under the Constitution. Of course, our Administration—and the people around us, personally—may not agree with Trump’s *policy positions;* yet even that does not alone threaten the Constitution we swore to defend. Presidential administrations come and go, as do alternations in power among the two main political parties, who regularly disagree with one another. Healthy democracy invites this disagreement, and alternations in power comprise an essential feature of what it means to be a democracy in the first place.

This time, however, things seem markedly different from past campaigns. Evidence increasingly suggests a potential threat lurking in the shadows: a foreign government working actively to undermine American’s faith in the electoral process and to influence the election’s outcome. This *may* constitute a threat to the Constitution. Although the precise form and extent of that threat remain unclear, you must be vigilant. If necessary, you also must be ready to act in defense of the country, its institutions, and the Constitution’s integrity.

On the other hand, the public will perceive any action—should we take it—wearily. The foreign government appears to be working *against* our political party’s preferred candidate. Complicating matters further, that candidate, Hillary Clinton, served as Secretary of State under our Administration. Interfering therefore carries potentially large political consequences. Not only is Clinton a divisive figure, but heavy interference on your part will also create the impression—right or wrong—that the Obama Administration is simply working to install one of its own as a successor. Republicans will be outraged, Democrats will be skeptical, and independent voters will perhaps search for ways to block your efforts.

*Current Policy:*

The Administration has historically preferred neither to attribute attacks to Russia publicly nor to retaliate against Russia for cyber attacks publicly (e.g., attacks against the White House, State Department, or Department of Defense).

*Timeline*

November 2014 Russian operatives hack the White House (unclassified) and State Department networks. The attacks continue into 2015.

Early 2015 The Netherlands notifies the National Security Agency about a significant data stream from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) Headquarters to Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service. US officials consider this to be conventional espionage. The NSA notes the issue in its logs and shares information about the unusual activity with other agencies.

August 2015 The FBI notifies a DNC technology support worker that the DNC may have been hacked. The tech worker does not believe the informant is an FBI agent. The FBI tries to convince the worker over the coming months.

December 2015 Russian operatives attack various election systems throughout the United States. These continue through the summer of 2016.

February 2016 The FBI (i) secures a meeting with DNC officials, including its technology worker; (ii) supplies logs to help DNC officials find the Russians who compromised their systems, as well as what may have been taken; and (iii) encourages the DNC *not* to disrupt the Russian attack, so that it can further monitor the attack and prevent the attackers from critically damaging the entire DNC system.

March 2016 The FBI detects phishing emails that target the Clinton campaign. They notify the campaign.

April 2016 The DNC detects unusual network activity. The FBI asks the DNC for internal logs, so that it can help the DNC identify the IP addresses attacking the DNC. The DNC finally realizes that it had been the target of a serious attack.

May 2016 George Papadopoulos, a Trump campaign foreign policy advisor, tells the Australian ambassador to the United Kingdom that Russia has damaging information about Clinton.

The FBI opens a counterintelligence operation into the Trump campaign.

June 2016 Crowdstrike, which the DNC hired, investigates the unusual activity on the DNC network and attributes it to Russian actors. Crowdstrike notified the FBI of its findings.

The DNC publicly announces that Russian state-backed hackers compromised its computer systems.

The DCLeaks website launches. American hacktivists appear to run it.

Guccifer 2.0 begins operating, claiming to be a Romanian. It contacts the media repeatedly, publishes some stolen documents, and refers the media to DCLeaks. Once WikiLeaks begins publishing stolen documents (see below), it refers the media there as well. The three bodies—Guccifer 2.0, DCLeaks, and WikiLeaks—together publish more than 150,000 emails stolen from various Democrats.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) publicly announces that Russian state-backed hackers compromised its computer systems.

July 2016 The Republicans hold their National Convention, at which they nominate Trump as their candidate.

WikiLeaks begins disclosing emails stolen from the DNC. The release narrowly follows the Republican National Convention and precedes the Democratic National Convention, at which Clinton expects to receive the party nomination. The released emails offer embarrassing details about the DNC, such as its preference for Clinton over Sanders, perks it provided to donors, and private communications. WikiLeaks claims that Russia did not provide it with the emails it released.

The Democrats hold their National Convention, at which they nominate Clinton as their candidate.

The Guardian, using a senior Administration official as its source, notes that “indications in the code used to execute the [DNC] data breach points to Russian culprits. That assessment matches the preliminary conclusions from a recent series of cybersecurity firms that have analyzed the hack.” Nevertheless, the Administration can “not ‘unequivocally’ attribute the attack to a ‘Russian state actor’ (The Guardian, July 2016). Reports suggest, however, that the consensus within the Administration—including the intelligence agencies—is that Russia bears responsibility for the attacks.

In a news conference, Trump encourages Putin to steal and release Clinton’s emails. These emails historically resided on her private server, from which she conducted (unclassified) business as Secretary of State.

July 2016 The State of Illinois notices unusual activity—namely, a large increase in outbound data volume—on its Board of Elections’ voter registry website. The attack compromised the names, dates of birth, genders, driver’s licenses, and partial Social Security numbers on up to 90,000 individuals.

August 2016 The CEO, CFO, and Communications Director of the DNC resign.

The FBI warns the State of Illinois to guard its systems against a potential cyber threat, but does not attribute that threat to Russia. DHS also reaches out to other states to determine whether the same malicious IP addresses have contacted other states’ infrastructure. Throughout the month, it becomes clear that the Russians are regularly probing numerous states’ election infrastructure (e.g., voter databases).

September 2016 DHS determines that the Russian government has targeted internet-connected election-related networks in twenty-one states. The effects may or may not reach the additional states. It decides not to notify the targeted states.

**Assignment 6: Crisis Response Memo**

The NSC must draft a crisis response memo, outlining its recommendations to the President. How should the Administration address foreign intervention in the 2016 elections? This task is time sensitive. Each day, the elections—and therefore, the consequences of foreign intervention in them—get closer.

*Format:*

The NSC will meet under the leadership of its Acting Chairperson.

*Deadline:*

The Gamemaster will provide you with the specific date on which the President expects to receive the memo.

*Essential components*:

* Executive summary (i.e., what the NSC ultimately recommends in brief)
* Identification of the policy options available;
* Evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each policy option identified;
* Proposal of one or more policy recommendations; and
* The justification for (or reasoning behind) the recommendation(s) the NSC makes.

*Some advice:*

How to write differs by discipline and purpose. Writing a policy paper will therefore be unlike other writing assignments you have done in the past. To get a sense of what it entails:

* Read Herman, Luciana. (2018) “Tips for Writing Policy Papers” (available in Repository C); and
* Look at the ‘policy analysis worksheet’ section below.

*Research:*

To craft an effective policy, it is critical that you develop a clear understanding of Iran’s intentions and capabilities. To **begin** researching this topic, review the documents in Repository D. Pay close attention to excerpts from the Mueller Report, especially in light of the timeline provided above.[[1]](#footnote-1) You, your institution, and the NSC may also wish to consider additional evidence (i.e., items not in the repository); only evidence produced before the date of the President’s memo will be permitted in the game, however.

*Policy Analysis Worksheet:*

To make a well-informed policy recommendation to the President, you need to consider the various policy options available, as well as their relative strengths and weaknesses. Table 1 offers one template for such an analysis. The rows hold the policy options (e.g., invite Iranian leaders to a state dinner at the White House), while the columns hold the dimensions along which you will evaluate each policy option (e.g., how happy does it make you, how much does it cost, and so on). These dimensional evaluations then aggregate—however you choose—into a final assessment in the last column. Such an exercise has enormous value. It organizes your thinking and analysis, allowing you to compare policy options along a consistent set of dimensions. This, in turn, permits you both to select the ‘best’ policy (however you define that) and, perhaps more importantly, to explain to the President *why* you think that policy is ‘best’.

The analysis produced from this exercise becomes the raw material for your National Security Council Recommendation. In other words, once you have the information in Table 1, you explain it—in significant detail—in the final Recommendation Memo to the President. This will require you to outline each option (e.g., what is it *exactly*), catalog each option’s strengths and weaknesses (and the dimensions along which you are evaluating these), identify the option(s) that you recommend that the President select and why, and identify the option(s) you recommend that the President should avoid and why. You then attach an executive summary to the front so that the President can get the gist quickly. In short, you turn the table—whose logic the President will not understand, since he was not privy to your discussions—into a text that outlines the thinking and debate you undertook in Council.

It helps to remember that Table 1 is only a template. This means that you do not need to use it; indeed, you may find other methods of policy analysis more helpful. Furthermore, if you use the template in Table 1, it is only a guide. There are no ‘set’ number of policy options or dimensions that you must consider—although a greater number of each necessarily provides a more thorough analysis. Your memo ultimately needs to convince the President that you engaged in a thoroughly researched and debated policy process. If in doubt, err on the side of including too much!

**Table 1. Summary and Evaluation of Options**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Policy Option | Evaluative Dimensions | | | | |
| [Dimension 1] | [Dimension 2] | [Dimension 3] | [Dimension 4] | [Final Assessment] |
| [Option 1] |  |  |  |  |  |
| [Option 2] |  |  |  |  |  |
| [Option 3] |  |  |  |  |  |
| [Option 4] |  |  |  |  |  |

**National Security Council Recommendation:**

**US Response to Foreign Interference in the 2016 Elections**

[Date]

To: The Office of the President  
From: The National Security Council  
Re: Response to “Request for Recommendations on Potential Foreign Interference in the 2016 US Elections”

Executive Summary

* What the NSC recommends (in brief)

All Options Considered

* [first]
* [second]
* [third]

Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Option Considered

* [first]
* [second]
* [third]

Recommendation(s) and the Detailed Justification(s) That Support(s) Them

*Note: You may, but do not need to, use this document as a template for your final response to the President. As an alternative to the above structure, for example, the NSC could combine the sections on ‘all options considered’ and ‘strengths and weaknesses of each option considered,’ evaluating each option one at a time. Whatever structure you adopt for the final document, the document must contain all essential components listed in the assignment—i.e., an executive summary, all the options that the NSC considered, an evaluation of each considered option’s strengths and weaknesses, and one or more policy recommendations to the President, including the detailed reasoning that supports the recommendation(s).*

1. Repository D supplies you with background information on foreign hackers, the threat they pose, and their known interference in the elections. Although gathered in hindsight (during the Mueller investigation), evidence suggests that officials knew this basic information as the election approached. Other documents dated after the President’s memo, including other passages of the Mueller Report, will not be permitted during the NSC deliberations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)