



## **Parham Eftekhari**

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# Election Integrity: A Non-Partisan, Whole-of-Nation Effort

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There is near-unanimous agreement among national security experts that our adversaries are attempting to influence the outcomes of the 2020 elections through the pervasive use of digital and information warfare. Our intelligence communities are overwhelmingly made up of non-partisan, career civil servants. They use some of the most sophisticated signals and analytical capabilities in the world to monitor and assess these threats and their impact on campaigns, the election infrastructure, and voter perceptions. This intelligence is then passed onto our elected and appointed officials who develop overt and covert policies and operations to defend our homeland and the integrity of our democratic institutions against our adversaries.

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The bedrock of our democracy depends on trusting the analyses of our intelligence community as they act against election interference. Politicizing these facts plays into the very hands of the nation-state actors who are weaponizing information through social and traditional media to manipulate our perceptions on the strength of our democracy.

Between July and August 2020, several statements from the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) Director, William Evanina, objectively and accurately warned of the threats to the upcoming presidential election. Unfortunately, they were politicized across the political spectrum by elected officials and the media. This distracted from the critically important purpose of the messages, which was to arm the American people with the understanding that they have "a role to play in securing the election, particularly in maintaining vigilance against foreign influence."

The NCSC announcements confirmed that China, Russia, and Iran, three of America's top nation-state threats, are once again using cyberattacks and propaganda to manipulate voter perceptions and influence the 2020 elections. Depending on the threat actor's motivations, some machinations have favored President Trump, while others benefited former Vice President Biden. By spending news cycles politicizing this objective truth, the media forfeited the opportunity to educate American voters and business leaders on the long-term strategic motivations behind nation-state involvement in our elections, the risk this poses to the future of our nation and democracies around the world, and how citizens can defend against this rapidly emerging threat.

A recent article by *The Atlantic* succinctly summarized America's competition with China:

*“The contest isn’t about who gets to run the U.S. It’s about who deserves to run the world. And China, with its economy poised to overtake that of the United States, has already plowed billions into crafting an image as a responsible global leader, and billions more into cultivating global dependence on Chinese investments and Chinese markets.”*

Meanwhile, the efforts of Russia's Internet Research Agency, and other nation-state sponsored groups, have been documented interfering in everything: elections, social issues, and U.S. economic interests. These talking points should be the focus of government leaders and media executives of all political stripes because this great-power competition, and other complex, critical national security issues, are at the root of adversarial interference in our election.

As stated in Director Evanina's July 24, 2020 announcement:

*“As Americans, we are all in this together; our elections should be our own. Foreign efforts to influence or interfere with our elections are a direct threat to the fabric of our democracy. Neutralizing these threats requires not just a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-nation effort.”*

With the elections occurring amidst a pandemic and a nation-wide social justice movement, opportunities are virtually endless for nefarious adversaries to divide Americans by exploiting emotions, fears, and frustrations. Voters must be vigilant about separating propaganda from the truth when consuming messages on social and traditional media. To help keep our nation safe, political content needs to be critically analyzed before it is shared, as this will reduce the risk of Americans inadvertently aiding the misinformation efforts of adversarial nation-states.

Director Evanina's statement that defending our democracy is not just a "whole-of-government" responsibility must be amplified. Technology and social media, in particular, has democratized communication and access to data in western societies. It is no longer just governments and large corporations, but individuals and organizations of all sizes who have the power to influence ideas and the direction of our nation.

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The social and economic benefits of our new digital world require that those outside of the public sector recognize the responsibilities that come with harnessing the power of technology and acting responsibly. That includes prioritizing security when developing and deploying technology into our organizations, not politicizing cybersecurity as a topic, and practicing caution when engaging with social media content.

Our government and its leaders will always have a crucial role to play in ensuring the integrity of our elections, both by reducing adversarial activity and by separating politics from election security. However, it is ultimately voters who give credence to a message, and that "whole-of-nation" voice can be our greatest defense of all.

## About the Author

Parham Eftekhari is a national security expert working with federal agency and policy leaders to improve cybersecurity and critical infrastructure resiliency. He is the Founder and Board Chair of the [Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology](#) and the Senior VP of the [Cyber Risk Alliance](#), where he serves as the Executive Director the [Cybersecurity Collaborative](#).

## About ICIT

[The Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology \(ICIT\)](#) is a 501c(3) cybersecurity Think Tank with a mission to cultivate a cybersecurity renaissance that will improve the resiliency of our Nation's 16 critical infrastructure sectors, defend our democratic institutions, and empower generations of cybersecurity leaders.