

Intelligence Analysis as Support for Policy and the Military

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The United States has faced many crisis in its lifetime, and regardless of the time period, there will almost always be some kind of situation simmering in the world and threatening to boil over at any moment. However, when those problems escalate, as many ultimately do, it is crucial that the American government is equipped to handle it with confidence, efficiency, and diligence to the best of its ability. For this to happen, support from the intelligence community is key, and it plays a very important role in steering the course of events during national crises. This essay argues that in the event of a national emergency, the American public could trust intelligence analysis in the form of support for policy and the military to be independent and reliable. To demonstrate this argument, I will first define the process of intelligence analysis and highlight the key elements involved in it to provide context for later discussion of its independence from personal motivations. Then, I will specifically outline how support for policy is designed to be explicitly nonpartisan as a central tenet of the community-wide effort to provide policymakers with the objective evaluation of key issues needed to inform policy decisions. I will then demonstrate how the IC's support for the military is similarly independent due to the nature of the requirements demanded of military intelligence analysts. The final section will discuss the importance of this assurance and its implications on military action, both foreign and domestic policy, and public trust in government.

Definitions, Best Practices, and Community Standardization

First of all, one must define intelligence analysis and consider the relationship of the intelligence community to the government as a whole before making any determination about its independence. As discussed in class, intelligence analysis is defined as “a process of separating a

problem into its constituent elements, reducing complex problems to simple ones, organizing facts, filling in the missing pieces of a puzzle, and developing a theory to explain a problem or situation.”¹ In other words, intelligence analysis is as much about conceptual problem-solving and understanding how separate pieces of information can be reconciled, as it is about the factual knowledge contained in the intelligence. Our speaker on March 29th emphasized this point and very insightfully compared it to the field of systems engineering, in which engineers focus on how to integrate moving parts from different systems in order to optimize outcomes.² Clearly, what matters most in intelligence analysis is the process of reviewing information and making sense of it, rather than adding politically-motivated personal opinion.

Indeed, the IC has standardized this process using a structured method of analysis that includes implemented safeguards and best practices to avoid intelligence and analytical failures. For example, the Analysis Tradecraft Primer, prepared by the US government in 2009, outlines a number of techniques that should be considered in analysis. These include diagnostic techniques such as a Key Assumptions Check, which is generally used at the beginning of a project to review hidden or overt preconceptions and ensure that they do not sway the final judgment;³ contrarian techniques like Devil’s Advocacy, where one switches perspectives in order to find holes in a widely accepted belief or one’s own logic;⁴ and imaginative thinking techniques like Red Team Analysis, in which analysts consider cultural influences that may affect how a foreign actor would be expected to think or behave.⁵ Red Team Analysis helps avoid the problem of

¹ From in-class lecture presentation on March 1, 2018.

² From in-class speaker on March 29, 2018.

³ “A Tradecraft Primer,” Prepared by the US Government (2009), 7.

⁴ “A Tradecraft Primer,” Prepared by the US Government (2009), 17.

⁵ “A Tradecraft Primer,” Prepared by the US Government (2009), 31.

mirror imaging,⁶ in which analysts project their own behavior onto others and assume that people from other countries will act the same in any given situation, which may skew analysis.

Each of these techniques (just a small sample of those included in the primer) encourage analysts to follow set guidelines that allow them to most effectively understand the intelligence they are analyzing while also implementing shared best practices. In addition, Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203 outlines Analytic Standards along with a number of Tradecraft Standards for analysts to follow. Included in these principles are objectivity, independence from political consideration, strictly logical argumentation, and the requirement to distinguish between intelligence information and analytic judgment, along with an examination of one's confidence in those assessments.⁷ The IC's identification and adherence to universal standards serves to unify the community's analysis and prevent bias from seeping in on a community-wide level.

It is also important to note that from a broader angle, analysis is just one step in a larger process tasked to the intelligence community. Indeed, the basic responsibilities at the core of the IC are to “warn, inform, provide decision advantage, mitigate risk, reduce uncertainty, foster a dialogue, provide context and appreciation of complexities, better understand the adversary or ally, and make our policymakers think.”⁸ For the IC to carry out those duties, it must package finished intelligence that can be disseminated to a variety of officials, including members of Congress, diplomats, and military leaders. Having such a broad mission and a wide audience means that the IC must present only the facts and an objective evaluation of them, so that the insights may then be used in different ways by each of the respective consumers of intelligence.

⁶ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 366.

⁷ “Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards.” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*. United States (2015), 2-4.

⁸ From in-class lecture presentation on March 1, 2018.

Therefore, it is the IC's duty to ensure that its final product is absolutely independent, reliable, and objective, so that each of the aforementioned officials can be accurately informed and most prepared to make decisions. Overall, because of the nature of the intelligence community's role and what intelligence analysis entails, there is simply no room for bias by design on a fundamental level.

Intelligence Analysis in Support of Policy

More specifically, when looking at intelligence analysis in the form of support for policy, it is important to look at history to see how analysis has been presented and used the past. By definition, intelligence analysis is meant to provide in-depth and non-partisan background knowledge about a topic in response to a requirement or intelligence question by policymakers. As part of their task, and in recognition of the Analytic Standards from ICD-203 discussed in the previous section, analysts generally avoid making policy assertions or pushing one side over another. These actions would be considered part of the larger umbrella of politicization,⁹ which is forbidden in the culture of the IC. Rather, analysts approach their work through a scholarly lens, as they are considered to be “[the IC]’s scholars, usually Ph.D.s and other area specialists... many are educated in the Nation’s top private schools, and most have an academic air about them.”¹⁰ Accordingly, they package the pertinent information with an assessment of all possible options, so that policymakers are sufficiently briefed on what they need to know in order to make decisions, but do not feel pressured one way or another by the analysis itself. This emphasis on

⁹ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 2.

¹⁰ Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 461.

the academic side of intelligence shows that analysts are primarily researchers and thinkers, rather than partisans.

By extension, the one thing that sets intelligence analysis apart from any other area or function of government is the fact that it does not push an agenda of any kind. As one scholar notes, “Intelligence analysis, by contrast, represents no conventional domestic interest groups. It is a source of advice about foreign countries.”¹¹ Since the intelligence community is not a stakeholder in political matters, it has no interests to protect and is uniquely positioned to provide purely objective guidance.

However, just because the IC itself lacks political motives does not mean that it does not need to remain cautious about political influences. In seeking to stay objective and neutral, one potential pitfall that the intelligence community generally works to avoid is allowing the analysis to be influenced by its consumers. The IC must watch out for this because it is basic human nature to want to please the people that one works for, and that could cause intentional or unintentional changes in the substance of analysis. However, research has found that intelligence analysis has historically been unchanged by considerations of what its audience might want to hear:

“So far, there is little evidence of analysts cutting their cloth to suit congressional consumers[...] Analysts did not soften the news in the Philippines even though it was unwelcome in the administration. [...] In the heat of the debate over Nicaragua, the House Intelligence Committee, while generally praising intelligence community performance, certainly did not feel it had been pandered to-- quite the contrary.”¹²

Evidently, there is a fine line between supporting policymakers as an official duty and pandering through skewed analysis, and the intelligence community has generally been

¹¹ Gregory Treverton, “Intelligence: Welcome to the American Government.” *Intelligence and the National Security Strategist* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 373.

¹² *Ibid*, 371.

successful at balancing this and fully committing to the former, while avoiding the temptation of indulging in the latter. Indeed, I would argue that the current system of offering a straightforward assessment (even if it is not what policymakers wish to hear or contradicts their personal beliefs) is the best way to support policy, because it means that policy decisions can be based on hard data, rather than ill-informed delusions further encouraged by yes-men. Rather like a parent to a child who does not want to eat vegetables, analysts must show policymakers the reality of a situation so that they can fix any mistakes in their understanding of the topic and take the course of action that is best for the country. Doing otherwise would mean failing in the IC's duty to provide a valid and reliable foundation of knowledge for policy to build upon.

Intelligence Analysis in Support of the Military

As discussed in the first section of this essay, the intelligence community has a wide range of responsibilities depending on which part of the government it is dealing with on a case-by-case basis. In terms of military interaction, analysis tends to support certain goals: “minimize combat casualties, give indications [that a threat is pending] and warning [about its implications], avoid technical surprises, and ensuring the technical superiority of US forces.”¹³ Each of these goals is achieved through the different components of military intelligence, which is comprised of indicators and warnings, force protection and modernization, operational campaign planning and execution, and training and readiness.¹⁴ Both the components and the overarching goals of military intelligence are clearly focused on very specific elements such as security, military operations, field positioning, and technical capabilities. As a result, like other

¹³ From in-class lecture presentation on March 22, 2018.

¹⁴ Ibid.

areas of analysis, there is little room for politicization in the design of analytical support for the military.

Military-focused analysis is also used by a number of non-political leaders, like military commanders, deployed troops, and unified commands,¹⁵ so naturally much of the analysis will be focused on topics that are specific to those leaders in supporting their work. These would likely require more short-term operational and tactical information, while Congress and defense policy-makers at the Pentagon would likely utilize more of the long-term strategic intelligence.¹⁶

Interestingly, one scholar notes the value of a distinction between intelligence and the military, arguing that it is important for the CIA specifically to not align itself too closely with the military, because “if the CIA grows too close to the interests of the military, it will lose its objectivity and relevance to policymakers.”¹⁷ Essentially, there are advantages for the intelligence agencies to remain as an independent community, not attached to either Congress or the military, that allows for the protection of the integrity of its intelligence analysis.

For example, intelligence analysis was instrumental in implementing the military policy of containment during the Cold War, as the IC was tasked with exploring Soviet probes, military capabilities, allies, and connections, as well as assessing similar information about the strength of US allies.¹⁸ In this instance, there is a delicate line: intelligence analysis was used to help the military carry out the containment policy, but it was not involved in actually crafting that policy or the politics behind it. Paradoxically, this shows that there is a vital link between intelligence

¹⁵ From in-class lecture presentation on March 22, 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 473.

¹⁸ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 376.

analysis, the military, and policy, yet the three must remain separate and distinct if they are to work together effectively.

Conclusion

To summarize, intelligence analysis plays an important role as support for policy and the military, yet it includes safeguards against politicization and individual bias which ensures that in the event of a national emergency, the American public could trust this analysis to be objective, valid, and reliable. The assurance of the neutrality of intelligence analysis is also crucial for the functioning of both policy and the military, since both fields require informational insights that are as accurate as possible in order to carry out their respective missions effectively. Any bias would complicate policy decisions and potentially throw off military leaders' coordination. Even the appearance of bias would be enough to cause confusion and chaos surrounding the validity of every piece of analysis that had ever been produced previously, so there must never be even a shred of doubt about the objectivity of intelligence analysis.

The American public would also be heavily affected by that kind of thing, since it places its trust in the government to keep the country safe and remain ethical in all of its decisions. The politicization of intelligence analysis and the resulting effects would be a blatant betrayal of that trust, and would likely change the dynamics in the country for the worse. Therefore, maintaining objectivity should be an absolute priority for intelligence analysts and the intelligence community as a whole in everything that it does. This is particularly true in times of trouble when it feels as though a national crisis may be on the horizon, since that is when the country looks to its government to provide stability and confidence in the face of adversity.

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