Challenging the Red Line
between Intelligence and Policy

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OVERVIEW

The "red line" is a warning to intelligence officers that, in order to maintain credibility with the policy community, they need to limit their role to informing policy discussions rather than expressing a policy preference. If they were to advocate a certain policy, the logic went, intelligence officers could be accused of distorting intelligence to bolster their policy preference.

All participants agreed that if a "red line" dividing intelligence from policymakers ever existed, it has become blurred in the post-Cold War era because a variety of factors—perpetual war, technology, terrorism—have had a profound impact on the relationship between policymakers and an intelligence community charged with supporting them. The result is probably reasonable when dealing with the terrorism issue, but most intelligence officers were concerned about the implications for more traditional foreign policy issues.

After the events of September 11th, the global war on terrorism and operations in Afghanistan and Iraq became the dominant foreign policy and intelligence priorities. A number of intelligence officers highlighted the fundamental changes being made to our intelligence community to provide counter-terrorism and war-fighter support. These include the redirection of people and collection systems, as well as rapidly expanding programs, budgets, and capabilities. Yet, although the IC is charged with worldwide coverage, in practice, people and resources are being concentrated on a finite number of issues. While counter-terrorism capabilities improve, participants argued, the Intelligence Community's (IC) capability to warn of the next global financial crisis or regional political-military disaster may well be eroding.

The sheer volume of information, the sheer growth of consumers, the pressure to provide analysis quickly, has driven research out of the market.

It was noted that the President and his senior advisors rely heavily on daily intelligence to conduct the war on terror, including in Iraq. However, it was also argued that because most senior policymakers and their staffs now have access to raw reporting and finished intelligence on their desktops, they are less reliant on traditional analytic centers at CIA, DIA, and State to tell them what the massive body of intelligence reporting means.

Intelligence managers stressed that counter-terrorism is intelligence-intensive, time sensitive, and relies heavily on CIA's covert action infrastructure. These former intelligence officers and most of their policy counterparts agreed that today the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) has to be more than an advisor in policy discussions that weigh the use of his paramilitary forces. As one of several "force commanders" in the U.S. Government, and at times the commander of the only forces engaged in certain theatres, the DCI ought not be constrained by any red line. Another group—primarily former analysts—argued that this blurring of the red line by intelligence and policymakers makes sense in the counter-terrorism realm but could lead to failures in other areas.

COLD WAR DIVIDE BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY

For decades intelligence officers tended to limit their role to informing the policy process by assessing the foreign environment and probable foreign responses to U.S. policy initiatives while avoiding advocating policy. In time—and at the urging of leading intelligence professionals such as Sherman Kent—analysts began to speak of a one-way "red line" dividing intelligence and policy, which prohibited intelligence officers from advocating particular policy options. This red line was meant to ensure that intelligence officers maintained credibility because they could not be accused of slanting analysis to support a favored policy.

Sherman Kent's view was that it was important for the estimative process to be detached from policy, and highly objective.

A former senior intelligence officer recalled that during this period the CIA could take this high-minded stance because it enjoyed a near-monopoly on critical information. He pointed out that the strategic environment was dominated by the overriding importance of estimating Soviet military capabilities and intentions and U.S. intelligence tailored its collection and analytic capabilities to address this issue. When policy discussions were held, the DCI provided unique value added based on a broad and deep understanding of Soviet defense industry and military forces. Only the major intelligence analysis organizations—CIA, DIA, and to a lesser extent INR—had the ability to collect, process, research, store, and analyze the massive body of classified data needed to speak with credibility on these issues. Another participant pointed out that disgruntled policymakers concerned that intelligence analysts were making biased estimates had to make a major effort, such as the mid 1970s Team A/Team B exercise on the Soviet strategic force posture, to effectively compete with the DCI's command of Cold War intelligence.

It was accepted that it was in the DCI's interest to present his assessment of the Soviet threat objectively and leave advocacy of alternative policy and force planning responses—especially those that impacted on the size and distribution of the U.S. defense budget—to the policy community. The robust collection and analysis capabilities justified by the Soviet threat were more than adequate to provide intelligence support on non-Soviet issues. The credibility and respect that the DCI earned in the Soviet strategic area carried over into policy discussions on non-Soviet

issues and, for the most part, the DCI and his senior analytic staff tended to honor the red line by limiting their role to intelligence advisor rather than becoming policy advocates.

There were occasions, however, when the Intelligence Community crossed the red line between intelligence and policy. A former senior CIA official brought up the significant policy disputes between CIA and the Pentagon during meetings in the 1970s and 1980s on arms control proposals. He recalled that the CIA would emphasize the need to verify Soviet compliance with arms control agreements through National Technical Means and argue for intrusive inspection provisions in draft agreements. The CIA's policy preference pitted the DCI against the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who, because of their interest in maintaining secrecy about U.S. weapons, tended to argue for less intrusive inspection provisions that would apply to both sides. It was agreed that once again the DCI was well positioned to bring unique information to the policy table because of the CIA's in-depth research into Soviet weaponry and unparalleled understanding of the capabilities and limitations of National Technical Means.

THE POST-COLD WAR DIVIDE
BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY

For over a decade after the ending of the cold war, U.S. intelligence did not have a single, dominant foreign threat to act as an organizing principle for prioritizing, sizing, and shaping intelligence capabilities. Rather, the intelligence community struggled to define a new mission as its resource base was downsized. There was no shortage of national security issues—humanitarian disasters, ethnic fighting, narcotics trafficking, weapons proliferation—but no obvious mega threat. Meanwhile, politicians provided the country with a peace dividend by cutting defense and intelligence spending after the U.S. and NATO won the cold war. The Intelligence Community struggled to maintain coherence during the 1990s, a period of introspection and near-continuous restructuring. The intelligence community was driven by uncertainty over how to demonstrate its value within a new, more complex strategic environment. Only recently, in the post-9/11 period, has the global war on terrorism provided both a new major focus for foreign policy and a justification for substantial growth in intelligence programs.

> *If the war on terrorism hasn't replaced the cold war, it certainly has become the central paradigm for what we're dealing with.*

INTELLIGENCE PRIORITY SHIFTS
TO SUPPORT FOR MILITARY OPERATIONS

The Gulf War was the defining event of the immediate post-Cold War era and the mixed performance of intelligence had a profound impact on intelligence priorities throughout the 1990s. Perceived intelligence failures before and during the war led to pressure from the Administration and Congress—and from the Intelligence Community itself—to do better next time. Simultaneously, the U.S. defense establishment—which owns almost all technical collection assets—realized for the first time the huge combat value of near real time intelligence on the battlefield and became a most effective producer and customer for tailored support to military

> *If you think that the Soviet problems were tough, well, try the one you've got now. You're really down in the sand now. You're not putting rocks together. You're putting granular stuff together.*

operations (SMO). Intelligence collection, processing, and analysis priorities were changed to emphasize the SMO mission. Some CIA analytic resources were redirected to SMO, but for the most part the military needed tactical rather than strategic analysis and developed its own analytic cadre. Whereas the data-intensive holdings of the intelligence community during the Cold War were used to support the national policymaking process in Washington, today's data intensive holdings support the war-fighter overseas.

INTELLIGENCE IS CLOSER TO POLICY THAN EVER BEFORE

One intelligence manager pointed out that he and his colleagues understood quickly that the end of the Soviet empire meant fundamental change for their business and took steps to strengthen interaction with the most senior officials at the NSC, State Department, and Department of Defense to better understand their substantive intelligence needs. He recalled that the National Intelligence Officers and senior CIA analytic managers were directed to increase their contacts with policymakers. More CIA analysts were detailed to downtown policy offices to ensure that the intelligence community understood policy priorities. But some proven mechanisms for identifying specific policymaker needs also were lost. One discussant noted the cessation of the annual global war games, which were held at the Naval War College and were used extensively by the NSC for shaping policy throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. This tool, by which the policy community and the intelligence community used to work together to gain non-linear insights, has been lost.

There was significant discussion of the need for intelligence to work more closely with policymakers because of the loss of predictability inherent in the Cold War. All participants agreed that it is important to make sure that intelligence officers know what is on the minds of policymakers and, therefore, they need to be included in the relevant meetings from the top on down. This is especially important because of the large number of young people now being absorbed into the intelligence community. They need to move quickly to understand what's going on.

In addition to understanding policymaker areas of interest, the discussants also talked about how to frame the critical questions on these issues. One former intelligence manager said, "It takes more than sifting through the daily traffic and coming up with a good judgment. We don't do a very good job with that. But I think managers of intelligence and analysis have begun to experiment with how you actually answer the questions of policymakers in a much more substantial and detailed way—and with information they can use, not too general, not too detailed . . . just right."

Intelligence officers in particular emphasized the importance of being relevant. One discussant claimed that the worst thing as an intelligence officer is to be ignored—this is even worse than being wrong. "Being wrong—if you were wrong for the right reasons—is never a particular problem, but being totally irrelevant to the policy considerations was always the thing that you had to fear the most."

To improve the relevance of intelligence to policy, the NSC developed a formal set of priorities (Presidential Decision Directive PDD-35) in the mid 1990s to help the intelligence community prioritize its efforts. This system called on the policy community to categorize foreign policy issues in tiers of descending importance. It

was successful in forcing the policy community to address the question of priorities head-on. On the other hand, at least one participant pointed out the downside of the PDD-35 process. "One of the reasons I think we've gotten less good at the strategic level is because the budget process has been driven toward the PDD 35 issues. This process, which was instituted for good reasons, ended up distorting how we allocate our resources within the community. Tier one issues got the most and then the broad-based research covering the rest of the world. Tier 2 and 3 issues got less. I think there was a spill-over from the budget world as to how the community did its business."

Former intelligence officers discussed the technical steps taken by the CIA to be more responsive to the policy community. These efforts culminated in giving top policymakers and their senior staff access to almost all intelligence—from raw reporting to finished analysis—on their desktops. A former policymaker remarked that this increased intelligence/policy proximity, combined with revolutionary growth in information management capacity and data mining tools, has given today's policymaker the capability to conduct his or her own fairly sophisticated analysis, independent of the traditional intelligence analysis prepared, vetted, and presented by CIA, DIA, and INR.

> *In a world in which the information is available to everyone, the intelligence community is simply a second opinion.*

One former intelligence officer countered that despite the fact that policy officials and their staffs can and do produce their own analysis based on raw intelligence, it remains risky to ignore the Intelligence Community's views. He argued forcefully that "intelligence" produced outside the IC is rarely up to par because it is not produced by long term experts who adhere to rigorous analytic standards in assessing large number of often contradictory reports. Former policymakers pointed out that they and their colleagues always pay attention to what the IC says in part because they realize that Congress has access to the Intelligence Community's products and will use them as a basis for questioning the Administration's policies. The policymakers also are aware that their decisions can be called into question by intelligence leaked to the press by bureaucratic rivals. Another conference attendee claimed that this prospect at times led him to refrain from asking the Intelligence Community for an assessment unless he was certain of what it would say.

> *This notion that policymakers can do intelligence as well as the intelligence community . . . just isn't credible. There's too much information. The volume is so great that any policy maker who believes that he can look at that information and come up with good answers is a fool.*

One participant argued that policymakers aim at achieving difficult goals and, not surprisingly, prefer optimistic, up-beat assessments that allow for the possibility that their particular diplomatic or military policy will succeed. For example, in late 1998 when the Clinton administration was pursuing a diplomatic settlement in Kosovo the last thing the key actors in the policy community wanted to hear was an intelligence assessment that peaceful conflict resolution was almost certainly not feasible because of the fundamental disagreement between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians over independence.

On the other hand, intelligence officers normally emphasize the downside risk. There was general agreement that the penalty for not giving adequate warning that something bad is going to happen is much more severe than any blowback from not warning that something positive will happen. For example, the DCI was criticized harshly for his failure to predict the strategic weapons tests in Pakistan and India in

1998, but there was little policy reaction when the intelligence community failed to forecast that there would be virtually no computer problems encountered anywhere in the world when the clock struck 2000.

Most participants thought that this internal tension between pessimistic intelligence and optimistic policy normally leads to thorough if sometimes contentious examinations of both the intelligence and the outlook for a policy initiative. Some policymakers actually consider this tension as a best-case scenario for the insertion of intelligence into the policy process. One former policymaker warned, however, that when intelligence and policy both prefer a pessimistic outlook—such as the threat posed by WMD in Iraq—there is less rigor and a greater chance for error. One senior intelligence manager argued that this gap is less likely to occur if the IC includes multiple analytic centers.

SEPTEMBER 11TH CHANGES EVERYTHING

With the catapulting of the war on terrorism to center stage after 9/11, participants agreed that intelligence has once again become a major determinant shaping U.S. foreign policy. But, as noted by a former policy officer, the old divide between intelligence and policy is blurred if not gone. Policy officials armed with raw reporting no longer hesitate to shape intelligence and intelligence officers recommend policy moves.

If the machinery works well, intelligence shapes policy. That's the basic underlying logic. The other piece is a reverse theorem. Does policy shape intelligence?

Secretary Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz and a number of others in the Bush Administration are intelligence experts in their own right and have written on the subject extensively. As one former policymaker noted, this Administration knows what support it wants from intelligence. Another participant quipped that the President and his senior advisors have become "intelligence junkies." Not for many years has there been a President who spends significant time every morning on intelligence—the President's Daily Brief (PDB). President Bush has demonstrated a personal focus on counter-terrorism operations, which are intelligence-intensive, time-sensitive and tactical in nature. Much tasking comes directly out of the morning PDB meetings. The IC also has new intelligence customers in the Department of Homeland Security and increased interest in intelligence by all law enforcement agencies. This in turn presents significant new challenges, as the IC must relate in new ways to the FBI and other law enforcement organizations.

It should not be a surprise, a former CIA officer noted, that the DCI's daily schedule is dominated by the war on terrorism, including Iraq. This panel member characterized counter-terrorism as tactical and intelligence-intensive in terms of technical collection, but even more demanding on human source collection, liaison, and covert action capabilities. He claimed that when the DCI speaks on a covert action initiative or the use of covert action as part of a policy initiative, he is operating as a policy advocate. As a "force commander" the DCI has a direct bureaucratic interest in advocating a particular policy option. Like other force commanders, he also must motivate his troops by maintaining a positive outlook on their prospects for success, regardless of CIA's analytic assessments.

A former policymaker, while agreeing with the need for the DCI to take a personal role in the war on terrorism, emphasized the opportunity cost this imposes on the Director's other major job—managing the rapid growth of the IC. Another

participant pointed out that demands on the DCI's time were compounded by his diplomatic role in the Middle East, a mission first directed by former President Clinton but continued until recently by President Bush.

A former intelligence officer summed up this discussion saying that the new priority on terrorism has fundamentally changed the CIA, transforming it into a single-issue organization. The Directorate of Operations now directs its energy "like a laser" on counterterrorism and Iraq and a significant fraction of CIA's analytic cadre has been redirected toward counterterrorism both within CIA and on assignment to Homeland Security, the FBI, the Terrorist Threat Integration Center (TTIC), and elsewhere. The remaining CIA analysts are overextended producing current intelligence. There is still a residual capability to look at WMD proliferation issues, but few analysts have the time to conduct in-depth research on regional or functional issues. This shift in analytic priorities, coming on the heels of the downsizing in the 1990s, has had the unintended consequence of shrinking the CIA's in-depth research and analysis capabilities by an order of magnitude.

> *There's no analyst going to waste his or her career preparing research papers when you can get a photo op by writing a page and a half current intelligence article for the President.*

WHAT POLICYMAKERS NEED

Intelligence will always play a role in the foreign policy process. Historically, the participants characterized this role as relatively clear during the Cold War, uncertain throughout the 1990s, and only now settling into a mode shaped by the post-9/11 war on terrorism and the Iraq war. There was a consensus at the meeting that senior policymakers—elected officials, political appointees, and career government officials at the top two or three levels of the national security apparatus—want intelligence to support them even though some of them may not always know exactly what they need or how to ask for it. Therefore these policy officials look to intelligence professionals to be the brokers, to shape intelligence's role at the policy table.

One former policymaker pointed out that certain aspects of what is needed and wanted have not changed, i.e. policymakers want predictability (no surprises); they want intelligence that makes their job easier, not harder; and they prefer intelligence that supports their bureaucratic agendas as well as their substantive ones. They absolutely need intelligence that keeps them from taking unwarranted risks, or making bad decisions for American interests.

Throughout the conference there were suggestions that some policymakers want slanted information that reinforces policy preferences. This is, in the view of participating policymakers, a mistake. There is an old saying that "if you want it bad, you'll get it bad". Policymakers' personal proclivities should be secondary to the need to have the most objective and the most thorough intelligence on the issues of highest priority. What the policymakers need, and should want, is objective fair analysis which provides them with the greatest amount of reality that can be achieved.

The issue of what the policymaker needs was summarized by a former policy practitioner who said "they want accurate useful information they don't know or corroboration of what they do know".

This was supplemented by another participant who said that what a policymaker wants to know is what's likely to happen so he or she can choose among two or three policy options.

Policymakers want something they can use as part of the policy process which can mean they want to be able to characterize the nature of the source of information. And that's difficult for the intelligence community, because they need to protect sources and methods and, as we have seen recently, this can lead to friction in the relationship.

Another point emerged when a discussant said that where information is generally available and generally interpretable, the intelligence community is a valuable second opinion. It gives you somebody who is not in the policy chain who can challenge your assumptions or provide an alternative reading of facts.

CHALLENGES

The majority of former intelligence officers at the roundtable were concerned for the fate of the Intelligence Community. They said they believe it needs to face up to two key challenges or risk being charged with more intelligence failures.

First, in the counter-terrorism area, despite significant improvements, the public expectations for intelligence are unrealistic. One discussant compared the public's view that intelligence can foil all terrorist plans, at least within the U.S., as the equivalent of expecting the FBI to not just solve but to prevent all bank robberies. Such expectations are unrealistic. Yet another catastrophic terrorist attack inside the U.S. could lead to collapse of public and political support for the CIA and Intelligence Community as now configured.

Another group of participants drew attention to the risk CIA runs in reducing coverage of non-terrorism issues. Most agree that the drawdown in in-depth research and analysis increases the likelihood that intelligence will fail to warn of the next financial or regional crisis. A series of bungled assessments on such issues could also lead to a major loss of confidence.