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Trends in transmission

New Links Between Intelligence and Policy

David D. Gries

No subject in intelligence has led to more debate and less agreement than the linkage between the intelligence and policy communities. Sherman Kent, Ernest R. May, Robert M. Gates¹ and others have explored the subject in books and articles. Colleges and universities teach courses on it. Yet some aspects of the linkage remain largely unexplored. What kind of intelligence is transmitted between the two communities? How is it transmitted? How do policy officers use it?

In the first decade after passage of the National Security Act of 1947, which laid most of the foundations for an intelligence community, only the most senior intelligence officers maintained regular contact with policy officers (deputy assistant secretaries and up or their equivalent). Intelligence officers were also less numerous in those days, and intelligence agencies were only partly accepted as players in Washington. The situation changed in the next three decades. The Intelligence Community grew rapidly, first during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and again during the Reagan years, and intelligence agencies gradually became established in national security circles. The result is that today intelligence and policy officers of all levels spend far more time together.

An important consequence of increased contact is that the formal and impersonal linkages of the past have become more informal and personal. Oral assessments delivered during face-to-face contacts now outnumber written assessments delivered through classified mail channels. The more senior the intelligence officer involved, the more likely that oral rather than written assessments will be conveyed. As a result, intelligence officers themselves have become part of the

transmission system, and policy officers are using intelligence in somewhat different ways.

Growing Importance of Oral Assessments

Oral assessments are analytical evaluations or judgments as distinguished from current intelligence. They are conveyed during discussions at the countless informal meetings that dot the calendars of senior officers in national security departments and agencies and at the more formal policy-coordinating meetings held at various levels from assistant secretary to the President himself. These meetings offer opportunities for intelligence officers to provide direct policy support, as for example, when policy officers at a series of meetings in April 1990 solicited assessments of policy options concerning the Lithuanian situation. A senior officer from the mid 1970s—a deputy director, a national intelligence officer, an office director from one of the intelligence agencies—would notice a marked increase in this kind of contact today.

Oral assessments are also transmitted in briefings to a steadily widening audience. On any given working day dozens of intelligence officers give briefings on everything from Soviet agricultural policy to narcotics production in the Andes. On the receiving end are senior members of the Executive Branch, as well as members of Congress. The Intelligence Community is often at its best in these situations, because knowledgeable, working-level analysts usually deliver the briefings themselves. They speak from firsthand exposure to all the available intelligence.

There is another link, perhaps the most important one, that competes with meetings and briefings

between intelligence and policy officers. It consists of casual contacts, impromptu discussions, telephone conversations, and conference calls. These channels are much less formal than meetings or briefings, and the oral assessments offered in them are less structured. Arguably, the most important oral assessments are transferred through these least formal mechanisms. They mirror the way the government is doing business in the 1990s: *ad hoc* arrangements, reliance on personal ties, and a high degree of informality. Casual contacts also avoid some of the pitfalls of meetings and briefings, where bureaucratic competition among agencies and principals sometimes diverts attention from issues.

Because people convey oral assessments, the influence of the messenger can overshadow the message. Just as a persuasive officer makes a weak assessment sound good, so a poor briefer destroys a strong brief. When personal relationships also exist between intelligence and policy officers, the dynamics of friendship come into play. Friends are trusted and listened to; strangers may not be. And when a policy officer over time develops confidence in an intelligence officer, that confidence is likely to be transferred to assessments even though they may not be good ones.

Changing Role of Written Assessments

Several kinds of written assessments continue to play a key role in linking intelligence and policy officers. Some policy officers—former Secretary of State George Shultz was a recent example—prefer reading to briefings. Among written products, the *President's Daily Brief* stands out as influential, even critical, in supplying assessments to the President and his inner circle. The *National Intelligence Daily* and INR's *Morning Summary*, which circulate at subcabinet levels, are also influential, and they have a much wider circulation among policy officers.

Four other categories of written intelligence deserve special mention:

— National Intelligence Estimates stretch back to 1950, when CIA's fourth Director, General Walter Bedell Smith, responded to President Truman's request of 10 October 1950 for an assessment of Soviet and Chinese intentions in Korea to take with him to his meeting with General MacArthur on Wake Island. Smith assembled the heads of all the intelligence agencies that afternoon in his conference room and, according to Ludwell Montague's account, insisted that they produce six Estimates on Korea by 8:00 a.m. the next morning.² Forty years later, the key judgments of National Intelligence Estimates reach an influential audience in Washington, where they are separately circulated to the President and Vice President and to Cabinet and subcabinet officers. As a result, key judgments of Estimates are among the few written intelligence assessments regularly read at the top of government.

— Unscheduled written assessments—generally short papers in the form of memorandums, discussion papers for meetings, executive briefs and typescripts—also reach high-level policy officers. Such assessments often are prepared at the request of one of these officers to meet a specific need, and they are assured of a small but influential readership. Their key characteristics are brevity and focus. They do not appear on production plans, nor are they supported by extensive research. Yet each year policy officers ask for more of them, thus confirming their value. They are part of the larger trend not only from written to oral assessments, but also from scheduled written assessments to unscheduled ones.

— Written scientific and technical assessments, such as those that evaluate conventional and strategic weapons systems or analyze advanced technologies and economic competitiveness, find a ready audience, especially at the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Commerce, and Energy. The level of

detail provided in these assessments is too great to convey in a briefing, and a written record is often needed for future use.

- Unevaluated intelligence—raw reports from clandestine agents, pieces of SIGINT or imagery that have not been subjected to analysis—also flows to policy officers. Occasionally, unevaluated intelligence lands on the desk of a high-level policy officer, even the President, and directly influences decisionmaking. More often, unevaluated intelligence flows at lower levels, where it converges with and is incorporated in written assessments sent to the same customers. The convergence has an unintended byproduct: policy officers and analysts have access to the same unevaluated reports and thus can challenge each other's judgments.

With the foregoing exceptions, scheduled written assessments, formerly the Intelligence Community's chief product, today mainly influence the policy process indirectly. Senior intelligence officers and the staffs that support policy officers are now their principal readers. They rely heavily on them when preparing oral assessments and short papers. Scheduled written assessments thus have assumed a new and vital role, though not the one originally intended: they have become part of the foundation of the intelligence edifice, providing much of the analysis on which other intelligence products are based. Moreover, analysts who prepare scheduled written assessments are doing more than serving the policy process indirectly; they are honing their own analytical skills in preparation for the time when they will be making oral presentations.

Intelligence information conveyed by video cassettes is a special case whose market is growing rapidly. President Reagan was an enthusiastic customer. He recognized that biographic intelligence was more digestible when images and narrative were presented together. The picture of Qadafhi delivering a tirade has more impact than a written assessment alone. Because video intelligence combines the trend towards oral assessment with

television's pervasive influence, it seems likely that in the future more intelligence will flow into the policy community in this fashion.

Foreign Policy Decisionmaking

Before exploring how policy officers use intelligence, it is necessary to reflect briefly on how foreign policy is made in today's Washington. Few observers believe that policy formation is an orderly process where facts are lined up, analysis applied, and decisions made. Some would contend that most policy officers avoid making decisions, unless forced by events. Delay is preferable to making a decision that might adversely affect US interests, disadvantage a department, or blemish the record of a policy officer by revealing him or her as wrong. Faced with these possibilities, policy officers slow down the process and seek safety by spreading the responsibility within a wide circle. The larger the number of participants in making a decision, the smaller the risk to any one of them.

Nor are most foreign policy decisions made all at once. Caution marks the process. The pressure of events almost always starts the process; incremental decisionmaking completes it. Of course, not all decisions are made—or avoided—in this way. The recent US action in Panama and the Nicaraguan election are examples of events that forced policy officers to act rapidly and decisively. But they are exceptions.

Usually the events that force policy officers to make incremental decisions are far less dramatic. They include clearing positions for meetings and informal discussions within the Executive Branch; coordination of briefing books, arrival statements, toasts, negotiating positions, and communiques for policy officers travelling abroad and for foreign visitors; approval of speeches, letters and talking points for senior policy officers; and dealing with Congress and the media. Contacts with the Congress require policy officers to clear briefings and testimony and

respond to investigations, new laws, and legislative reports. Dealing with the media requires policy officers to get ready for questions and answers at press conferences, respond to op-ed articles, prepare for discussions with journalists, and try to limit damage from leaks. Although no one of these events is likely to prompt a major policy change, taken together they often nudge policy in new directions or make new policy.

Evolving Uses of Intelligence

Because policy officers rarely make decisions in an orderly fashion, intelligence is usually used inefficiently. The policy process is messy and marked by delay, sharing of risks, and incremental steps. The uses of intelligence are equally messy.

Defending Policy. Policy officers spend much of their time shoring up support for decisions already in place or generating support for recent decisions, so the use of intelligence to defend policy is not surprising. Examples of this include defense against Congressional criticism and sallies from bureaucratic rivals, as when a policy officer in one department uses an intelligence assessment to weaken the argument of another department. During the 1980s, policy officers dealing with Nicaragua spent most of their energy defending policy.

The policy officer as a defensive player reflects in part the influence of Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran-Contra. Vietnam spawned an aggressive press that today challenges assumptions underlying policy, searches for bureaucratic infighting, and grills policy officers whenever possible. Watergate sharpened skepticism of government institutions and actions. Iran-Contra pulled more foreign policy decisionmaking power away from the Executive and gave it to the Congress. Leaks to the press also play a role. The more open political system that has grown out of Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran-Contra has made it difficult to keep secrets. Against this background, policy officers have become counter-punchers.

Supporting Action. Next in importance among the uses of intelligence by policy officers is support of diplomatic or other actions, sometimes to the dismay of the Intelligence Community, which wants to protect its sources and methods. President Reagan used intelligence to put the responsibility on Libya for bombing a disco in Berlin in April 1986 and to hold the Soviets accountable for shooting down KAL 007 in 1983. He used it again to accuse Libya of constructing a factory to produce chemical warfare agents, and the Bush administration repeated the same accusation in March 1990. High-level policy officers frequently use intelligence to confront foreign countries with evidence of unfriendly activities, as when intelligence detected widespread election irregularities in the Philippines in 1986.³ Subsequently, the White House issued a series of warnings to President Marcos.

Helping to Make New Policy Decisions. The use of intelligence assessments to assist in making new policy decisions is third in importance. Academicians identify this kind of decisionmaking as the principal use of intelligence assessments. Many would claim there is no other justification for maintaining a large intelligence community. But policy officers, as noted, spend more of their time defending policy and supporting direct action than in making decisions. Even when new policy decisions are being made, intelligence is not always used directly or consistently.

Nonetheless, intelligence assessments can and do help to identify policy options that will work, thus directly supporting decisions on new policies. This was the case in 1980, when President Carter based policy decisions on intelligence about preparations for imposing martial law in Poland.⁴ The policy officer may use intelligence to answer important questions underlying portions of a decision, as when intelligence was used to establish Toshiba's violation of COCOM regulations. Or, after reaching a decision, policy officers may encourage distribution of a compatible intelligence assessment to unify the Executive Branch behind the decision, as when intelligence was used to demonstrate that the INF Treaty could be adequately monitored. On the other

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hand, policy officers generally prefer those assessments that buttress their preconceptions. Consequently, they often use intelligence selectively.

Acquiring Information. As the traditional foreign policy menu has lengthened to include narcotics, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, the policy officer's need for information has grown dramatically. Often too busy to read widely in their fields and buffeted by daily events, policy officers draw down their intellectual capital. Intelligence assessments, when they are clear, concise, and timely, provide an efficient way to build capital. To fill specific gaps in their knowledge policy officers can also shape the flow of intelligence, though not its content, by requesting assessments that illuminate policies under review or highlight emerging issues.

Congressmen, and especially their staffs, also use intelligence to acquire information, thus helping to create a common fund of knowledge. This is a new development. In the 1950s and 1960s the Intelligence Community shared few assessments with the Congress, so that there was little commonality in the information base of the Legislative and Executive Branches. The amount of intelligence conveyed to the Congress has picked up steadily since the 1970s, when permanent oversight committees were established. Today, the Intelligence Community supplies similar intelligence to both branches. Policy officers ignore this development at considerable risk.

Users of intelligence have little time for reading lengthy assessments, and they tend to acquire information informally over time as they encounter intelligence counterparts in meetings, briefings, and casual contacts. Thus a general knowledge of the Intelligence Community's conclusions about an issue is slowly accumulated, ready for use when a crisis occurs.

Lost Opportunities

It is no accident that, with the exceptions already noted, oral assessments and short papers have

pride of place in the new intelligence—policy linkage, because they most closely match the penchant of today's policy officer for informality and personal transactions. That oral assessments have gained wide acceptance shows the attention intelligence officers are giving to their customers. Yet current practice leaves much to be desired. Too many policy officers fail to understand what intelligence can do for them. Instead of recognizing it as a useful resource, they view it as unhelpful or as a potentially competing input into the policy process. They also fail to give the Intelligence Community the guidance and feedback it needs. Some experienced policy officers know better. They identify a point of entry to the Intelligence Community, usually a deputy director, a national intelligence officer or an office director in one of the intelligence agencies. They keep their doors open. When requesting assessments, they frame questions carefully to ensure that the right issues are addressed.

Writing in *Lessons of the Past*, Ernest R. May advanced the notion that policy officers should depend more on historians. When historical experience is overlooked, May wrote, mistakes are common.⁵ Similarly, when intelligence is overlooked, mistakes can occur. But the press of daily business on policy officers means that the Intelligence Community has to find better and more efficient ways to compete for attention.

Strengthening Intelligence — Policy Linkages

As the transfer of intelligence assessments to policy officers shifts from a predominantly written to a predominantly oral enterprise, the Intelligence Community should pay close attention to the consequences.

—The Intelligence Community should reinforce the trend towards producing oral assessments of all kinds and short papers. A higher standard of performance in oral presentations can and should be achieved through improved training. As short papers become the norm, the temptation to make

them longer should be vigorously resisted. Particularly important, annual production plans covering scheduled written assessments should be scrapped; they are not needed in an environment characterized by rapidly changing requirements.

—There are pitfalls in the new game of oral assessments. Intelligence officers making oral presentations often operate alone, separated from the traditional process that subjects analysis to competitive review. Furthermore, a message that is delivered heavy-handedly runs the risk of wearing out the messenger's welcome among policy officers. For example, in 1962 Director John McCone lost much of his direct access to President Kennedy after the Cuban missile crisis. His oral presentations to the President were accurate, but, after missiles were discovered in Cuba, the President told McCone that "you were right all along, but for the wrong reasons."⁶

—The Intelligence Community does not keep adequate records of oral presentations, thus underscoring its failure to recognize their importance. Production records based solely on scheduled written assessments reflect yesterday's reality. They are inadequate for studies of production trends, and they overlook the contribution of oral assessments. A simple records system is needed to keep track of and give appropriate weight to oral assessments and short papers as well as to scheduled written assessments.

—The process through which policy officers task the Intelligence Community is too sporadic, complex, and cumbersome for a world that lives by speed and flexibility. Tasking is most effective when policy officers ask questions over the telephone or in face-to-face discussions, not when questions are submitted in writing. Similarly, most intelligence officers prefer to task their own systems with oral rather than written requests. The long, written tasking documents produced each year with such effort should be shortened and in some cases abandoned.

—Intelligence officers need to understand the policy process better. Too often they know more

about how that process works abroad than in Washington. Few intelligence agency schools offer high-quality courses on the American foreign policy process. Rotational tours for intelligence officers in policy agencies offer another way to sharpen understanding of the policy process. Few intelligence officers should reach senior levels without these experiences.

Modern American intelligence is not yet 50 years old. Much has been accomplished to bring intelligence and policy officers together in a productive relationship. In 1965 Sherman Kent concluded in *Strategic Intelligence* that "of the two dangers—that of intelligence being too far from the users and that of being too close—the greater danger is the one of being too far."⁷ Today, thanks to the oral assessments and short papers that flow through the informal and personal linkages between intelligence and policy, the danger "of being too far" has been reduced, though not eliminated. As resources tighten, a heavy burden falls on the Intelligence Community to make these new linkages and trends work better.

NOTES

1. Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence* (Archon Books, Hamden, Ct., 1965); Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Uses and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Robert M. Gates, "The CIA and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter, 1987/88, pp. 215-230.
2. Ludwell L. Montague, *General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence, October 1950-1953*, (Washington, D.C., CIA History Staff, 1970) (Declassified version released to National Archives under CIA's Historical Review Program in February 1990), Vol. II, pp. 26-30.
3. Robert M. Gates, "The CIA and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter, 1987/88, p. 221.

4. Ibid.
5. Ernest R. May, "*Lessons of the Past: The Uses and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*", pp. 172-190.
6. Rhodri Jeffrey-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (Yale University Press, 1989) pp. 136-137.
7. Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence*, p. 195.