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Rethinking Strategic Intelligence

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The state of strategic intelligence in the United States Intelligence Community (IC) is woeful. Indeed, a generation of support to warfighters has left questions about how able the Community is to do more strategic analysis. One of us, Treverton, chaired the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in the mid-2010s, and when it assessed Nigeria, there was not much Nigeria: rather, it was all about the terrorist group, Boko Haram. Nor was there much Boko Haram in those assessments: rather, it was all about unravelling networks and targeting leaders. Tellingly, when we asked IC professionals where strategic analysis was done well, they often pointed to university or think-tank researchers, not the IC.

Framing, and Understanding, the Beast

The first teaser is what is “strategic analysis,” which means so many things that it may mean nothing. Every agency, and almost all analysts, think they do it. It is also worth noting that strategic analysis and strategic intelligence are not the same; the former is a process, the latter is information. In our experience, the most common form of “strategic” analysis is vertical, deep dives into relatively narrow subjects. We wish we had language to frame an alternative, but the keys are *context* and *connection* across issues based on *evidentiary information*. A RAND legend, Tora Bikson, had a poster in her office: “The plural of anecdote is not data.” Following her, evidence is not always data, rather it can be trends in threat or future driven challenges, from geopolitics to technological breakthroughs, to environmental drivers.

China is a test case. Based on our interviews, the strategic dimension of the analysis was not bad, or at least understandable. Surely, we knew China was on the rise, and perhaps asking economic analysts to predict the stunning rise in its manufactured exports to the United States in the 1990s was a bridge too far. Then, trade as a share of global product was only slightly larger than it had been in 1913. In 1991, manufactured goods from low-income countries accounted for just 9 percent of U.S. imports, a number that rose to 15 percent by 2000 and 28 percent by 2007, with China accounting for almost nine-tenths of this growth.¹ American goods imports from China jumped by a staggering 1,156 percent from 1991 to 2007.² So, perhaps, was

¹ David H. Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson, “The China Syndrome: Local Labor Market Effects of Import Competition in the United States,” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 130, No. 6, October 2013, pp. 2121–2122.

² Autor, Dorn, and Hanson, 2013, p. 2158.

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imagining the nationalist autocracy of Xi Jinping another bridge too far, though we did know how different Chinese leaders had been, from murderous Mao to reforming Deng.

Perhaps it was ever thus. The first major U.S. intelligence assessment after World War II was National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 1-47, titled “Estimate of the Soviet Situation,” completed in early 1947.³ This document, prepared by the Central Intelligence Group, the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), assessed the Soviet Union’s burgeoning post-war power, highlighting its command of resources for national strength, commitment to overtaking the US, and economic sacrifices for military growth. While it did play a crucial role in shaping American foreign policy during the early Cold War period, it and its counterparts were usually pretty static—trying to count Soviet weapons—and often raised more questions than answers.

The Arab Spring is also intriguing. It was hardly surprising that many Arab states were ripe for upheaval. The CIA State Failure Task Force had developed interesting and innovative indicators of failure.⁴ What was harder was possible connections across countries. Again, perhaps understanding that the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor might echo across the region was also too hard. But it does underscore the dangers of U.S. intelligence advantages: lots of analysts working on relatively small accounts, which is good for deep understanding of details but perhaps less so for *connections and context*.

The Challenge of Connecting

For too long, the model of intelligence relations with policy has been transactional and commercial. No young person knows what a “transom” is, but the traditional paradigm for analysis was pushing intelligence analysis over the transom and hoping it would be read. In fact, intelligence and policy are interconnected parts of the same team and policy process. The interaction between them is a *relationship*, not a transaction.⁵ The commercial analogy is

³ The naming is somewhat confusing. This seems to have been another name for Central Intelligence Group, Office of Reports and Estimates, ORE 1/1, “Revised Soviet Tactics in International Affairs” (January 6, 1947), available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30007-78-central-intelligence-group-office-reports-and-estimate-ore-11-revised-soviet>.

⁴ See Michael J. Mazarr, “The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm: Requiem for a Decade of Distraction,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2014.

⁵ This is the emphasis in Josh Kerbel and Anthony Olcott, “Synthesizing with Clients, Not Analyzing for Customers,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 54, No. 4, Extracts, December 2010.

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somewhat off-putting, but the relationship resembles that between you and your financial advisors. They have expertise that you don't, but you are the expert on your goals and risk tolerance. The better they know you, the more helpful their recommendations will be. Thus, they will want to ask you lots of questions. And in the end, if the advisors aren't successful for you, you will go elsewhere. If intelligence isn't helpful to decisionmakers, they won't place much stock in it. They will not sever the relationship—after all, for them intelligence is a free good—but what should be a synergistic relationship will deteriorate into a going through the motions exercise.

The table below outlines the differences between a traditional approach to relations between intelligence and policy, and what Josh Kerbel and Anthony Olcott refer to as “synthesizing with clients.”

“Synthesizing” Relations between Intelligence and Policy

Traditional	“Synthesizing”
What do you want to know?	What do you want to accomplish?
Threat focused	Opportunity focused
Past oriented	Future oriented
Tends to be tactical	Must be strategic
Product	Process
Search for comparisons and analogies	Attention to contrasts and the unique
Interest in objects and nuggets	Interest in contexts and relations
Reactive	Proactive
Introverts and accounts	Extroverts and conversations
Tends to focus on what has failed	Allows examination of what has succeeded
Rewards ingenuity—big systems, more manpower, specialization, broad programs	Rewards imagination—agile, adaptive systems, less hierarchy, more networked
Collection	Cognition

SOURCE: Kerbel and Olcott, 2010, p. 23.

The table captures the spirit of what relations between intelligence and policy should look like in the future, with an emphasis on the connection as a relationship, *not* a transaction. Moreover, the relationship should function as a partnership in which each party brings something to the table and shares as much as possible. For policymakers, this means sharing what they are trying to accomplish, what they understand about the relevant context that could

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bear on achieving those goals, and what they think they know and want to know. For intelligence professionals, which usually means analysts, this means sharing information on the existence of intelligence that supports and challenges analytic judgments, the existence of alternative assessments and why they differ, confidence levels, and, as possible, information on sourcing.

Getting policy officials to pay attention is no mean feat. What another RAND legend, Don Rice, said of long-term planning—"If it doesn't affect decisions today, it's just entertainment"—is also true of strategic analysis. That came through loud and clear in a workshop RAND held more than a decade ago with former policy officials. They wanted more strategic analysis but they also wanted it to matter to what they faced today.⁶ When assistant secretaries serve, on average, less than two years, short time horizons are not going to go away. The mismatch in time scale is intrinsic. As an example, the 2004 *Global Trends*—the NIC's quadrennial look at longer-term futures—predicted a major global pandemic by the year 2020 and, alas, spelled out its implications for the world almost exactly as occurred.⁷ It didn't, however, suggest what those busy policymakers needed to do *today*.

The Current State of Play

As we look across the Community, we see fragmented and uncoordinated analysis in a process still impeded by the challenge of definition. Analysis remains focused on people and place more than ideas and ideologies; their analysis is too static and lacks dynamic agility. There remains too little focus on context and connective tissue. Nor did any of our interlocutors volunteer any of the IC school houses as exemplars of strategic analysis. And, despite the priority of the previous Director of National Intelligence (DNI), there is little evidence that reaching out to the more and more important private sector of "intelligence" has begun to do what it should—alter the way the IC thinks about doing its business, not just treating private intelligence houses as contractors.

Organizationally, some impediments have been self-inflicted wounds. From our perspective, for instance, ending the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Warning was a mistake. The other

⁶ Gregory F. Treverton and Jeremy J. Ghez, *Making Strategic Analysis Matter*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-287-NIC, 2012.

⁷ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2020: Mapping the Global Future*, NIC 2004-13, December 2004.

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NIOs didn't always relish him or her looking over their shoulders, but the process provided a check. And while the issues of warning weren't often strategic, the NIO provided a focal point and typically had to bring something extra to the table – for instance, additional information or perhaps the results of an analytic method.

By the same token, Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity developed a “prediction market,” which was a natural for the NIC but never got fully instantiated.⁸ Participants bet (or hazarded probability assessments) about possible future events. The questions to be bet on tended to be relatively short term, so the predictions could soon be validated or not. In that form, it was useful as a kind of red team: if the analysts thought the probability of a coup in some country was x , but the prediction market held it to be $2x$, that was the beginning of a conversation about why the difference.

The next steps would be to push the time horizon outward, toward more strategic outcomes. That would put a premium on identifying way-station outcomes that could be bet on. That, in turn, would have the additional benefit of pushing analysts to think harder about those outcomes as *indicators*. The IC talks of I&W, indicators and warning, but has, understandably, found it difficult to frame indicators beyond those for warning of war, for which many of the indicators are concrete and visible, like “out of garrison” activities by enemy troops. Framing waystations as indicators for more political, longer-term outcomes should be a welcome challenge.

Going Forward

The first necessity is taking the *demand* side seriously. That means having an IC cadre that is consistently in touch with policy officials. NIOs and the NIC are well positioned to play that role, given that their stock-in-trade is analysis, but other officials could do it as well. Sadly, the NIC itself now seems to have become a kind of in-house think tank for the DNI, when it ought to be the most outward-facing part of the IC. NIOs need not monopolize the role but should be the intelligence officers most engaged in building those client-like relationship with policy officers that will help them know when a piece of strategic analysis will matter to their counterpart's agenda *today*.

⁸ Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, Crown Publishers, 2015.

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One trouble is that too often the rules at the CIA and other agencies make it hard, not easy, for officers to go downtown to conferences and other gatherings where they can meet easily with policy counterparts. In short order, artificial intelligence (AI) will record transcripts of inter-agency meetings and allow intelligence officers to search them for indications of the interests and inclinations of the policy officials. Needless to say, AI will be a boon for strategic intelligence, if perhaps less so than for more tactical questions for which summarizing vast quantities of data is imperative. AI will be instrumental in developing timelines and scenarios, and remembering past assessments, both good and bad.

Then, that cadre of intelligence officers should reach out to others in government who share an interest in thinking more strategically. The State Department's Office of Policy Planning is logically one such place, though it tends to be absorbed with speech writing and special projects. The Under Secretaries for Policy at State and Defense are other natural candidates. So is the Pentagon's J-5 and so are National Security Council staffers. Organizing regular roundtables with those officials would be hard to schedule but well worth the effort. In Treverton's time at the NIC, the ongoing connection to "P," State's undersecretary for political affairs, was a valuable one.

The second necessity would be to take strategic analysis seriously, and the question there is to centralize or not. On balance we opt for centralization. The demise of the NIO/Warning is suggestive. The prevailing doctrine then became "every officer a warning officer," even with its own acronym, EOAWO, but the risk in government, as in life, is that if something is everyone's responsibility it will turn out to be no one's. The NIC had a Strategic Futures Group, but it was small and mostly engaged with the *Global Trends* series, as well as working on issues that didn't fall naturally to any NIO. It could be increased in size, ideally with officers seconded from other agencies, to provide the capacity to do more strategic assessments and do them quickly as windows open in today's policy agenda. That group would also serve as the cheer leader and focal point for strategic analysis across the IC. Its members would also be natural to connect with, and perhaps do short seminars for, the various intelligence agencies.

In that sense, it would also serve as a test-bed for developing the craft of strategic intelligence. Ideally, with connections across the analytic intelligence agencies, it would also build connections across issues and their context, helping to avoid the "silo" effect so apparent in the Arab Spring. It would also be the natural home for the prediction market and for taking that next step to include longer-term, more strategic questions. That would then require betting on more proximate indicators of whether the longer-term question was tending in one direction

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or another. Since Indicators have long been a stepchild in intelligence, doing better would be welcome on many counts.

New Collaborators, New Forms of Collaboration

Too often, U.S. intelligence services thought of private sector news outlets as competition. Now, though, the profusion of private sector “intelligence” organizations—from crowd-sourced open-source investigators, like Bellingcat, to business intelligence houses, like Eurasia—opens new possibilities of collaboration across the public-private divide. To be sure, much of the work of those houses is pretty tactical, even forensic, and thus of perhaps less value to the strategic analytic enterprise. Still, when Treverton chaired the NIC, he wanted to have more contact with the deputies, the number twos in the national security departments, and so considered writing a periodic “view from the Chair.” He realized, though, that if he curated work the NIC already had done, he would be as likely to confuse as to enlighten the deputies. He then thought he would do a 30,000-foot view of international politics. But he realized he couldn’t do better than Ian Bremmer of Eurasia Group. He had some advantage from classified materials, but Bremmer had the bigger advantage of talking constantly to global leaders.

Taking advantage of what the IC quaintly calls OSINT, or open source intelligence, will require U.S. intelligence to adjust its own methods lest it smother private sector collaborators in a veil of secrecy or bureaucracy. In thinking about future models and innovations, U.S. intelligence can draw lessons from past efforts that were abandoned—for instance, the CIA’s Open Source Works, none of whose analysts had security clearances, with half working in their native language.⁹ The challenge is to frame analysis at the lowest level of classification possible, ideally unclassified, so it can be shared easily across the private-government divide. That can be easier for strategic analysis, for in writing *Global Trends* the NIC found that, if looking out further than a year or two, the material on classified computers was less valuable. What was more valuable was reaching out to experts from universities, think tanks and Wall Street, as well as to a wide variety of foreign experts and practitioners. For instance, in doing the 2017 version of *Global Trends*, the NIC reached out to perhaps 2,000 people in thirty countries.

⁹ See William Usher, “The Case for Creating an Open-Source Intelligence Agency,” *Studies In Intelligence*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Extracts, September 2024.

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Implementation Issues

This framework for improving strategic analysis and thus strategic intelligence leaves open questions, especially about how a future enterprise might be shaped to address, for instance:

- Would weaving together ongoing and future efforts together under NIC leadership with substantive Net Assessment and Warning elements be a sound approach?
- Are there additional ways to address the intrinsic timescale (and other) mismatch between identifying strategic intelligence problems and producing analyses, on the one hand, and the issues and timescales of priority customers, on the other?
- Are there new methods, like the AI-produced minutes of policy meetings, to help the IC better understand the priorities of senior policy leaders and decisionmakers?
- How can the intelligence enterprise focus less on people and things and more on ideas and ideologies?
- How can the schoolhouses be reoriented to train in cognitive analysis more that geographic and technology analysis?

In sum, how can the enterprise be reshaped to encourage dynamic analysis and dynamic processes to address not only long-term challenges and not only cover big issues; structured to demand more context and connective tissues on a global scale; and become adaptive, distributed virtual enterprise of analysis cells, tailored to problem-and idea-centric challenges.

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Appendix. Community Viewpoints Gathered

Intelligence Community Experts

- Josh Kerbal
- John Culver
- Joe Gartin
- Rob Johnson
- Paul Pilar
- John Brennan

RAND Experts

- Jason Metheny, President and Chief Executive Officer
- Christopher Mouton, Senior Engineer
- James Riseff, Senior Technical Policy Analyst
- Li Ang Zhang, Senior Information Scientist
- Sherrill Lingel, Senior Engineer and Director, Force Modernization and Employment Program, RAND Project AIR FORCE

Current IC Leadership

- Sir Richard Peter Moore, former Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)
- David O. Shullman, National Intelligence Officer for China, Office of the Director of National Intelligence

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Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIG	Central Intelligence Group
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
IC	Intelligence Community
NIC	National Intelligence Council
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NIO	National Intelligence Officer
NSC	National Security Council
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence

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