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The Role of Intelligence in Policy Making

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The role of the Intelligence Community in policymaking is often misunderstood or overlooked when analyzing states’ behavior. This article introduces a framework that clarifies the roles of each actor in the relationship between intelligence analysts and policymakers, and how the interactions of the two synthesize to produce actionable policy. There are many obstacles for both parties in reaching valid, fact-based conclusions from intelligence. Understanding these obstacles will allow for greater opportunities to avoid them and produce better, sounder intelligence analysis and policy creation.

Introduction

What role do intelligence assessments play in the making of policy? In today’s world, this question must be answered. Doing so requires an assessment of the relevant literature on intelligence, and the development of a framework that accurately describes the influence of intelligence analysis on the policymaking process—and in turn, on the behavior of states in the international system. In the United States, the intelligence process is challenged in several respects: by the policymaking community, by the Intelligence Community (IC), and by deficiencies in communication between the two.

From the contemporary academic literature on intelligence, three major challenges can be identified regarding the analytic function of intelligence. The first is the problem of the information age, which has expanded the body of information that must be examined, thus making this analysis more difficult. The second is the problem of mindsets, in which one’s biases in turn distort the production or consumption of intelligence. The third is the problem of politicization of intelligence, either “top down” from the policymaker, or from the “bottom up” by the intelligence professional, which poses a similar danger.

Role of the Intelligence Community

The IC exists to support the policymaker. More specifically, the IC is a service community whose sole purpose is to assist policymakers with na-
tional security issues. Members of the Intelligence Community work as advisors who provide expert analysis of relevant information. However, while information is anything that can be known, intelligence is a refined subset that responds to specific policy requirements and stated needs. The intelligence analyst turns information into intelligence by connecting data to issues of national security, thereby giving it value. These products fill gaps in the knowledge set required to accomplish national objectives, from the tactical to the strategic level. The “time horizon” determines to which category the intelligence belongs: tactical intelligence is considered more pressing, dealing with “straightforward information,” while strategic intelligence encompasses more long term issues, including political and economic factors and trends over time.

Today, non-state actors present a greater challenge to the IC than before. Tracking loosely networked enemies who wear no uniforms, and often do not claim nationality, is exceptionally difficult. The IC works to help prevent, preempt, and disrupt attacks from such enemies by discovering their weaknesses and communicating these findings to policymakers, military commanders, and law enforcement agencies. As one expert states, “the first priority should always be to get there before the bomb goes off.”

In order to provide timely reports, intelligence professionals collect, analyze, and synthesize relevant information from various resources, seeking the most current data possible. This data is then presented to the policymaker so as to offer sufficient background to evaluate current policy and action alternatives.

A common misconception of the IC’s role is that it makes predictions. It does not. Instead, the IC writes estimates, generating possible outcomes based on available information. At best, intelligence contributions are designed to help policymakers understand complex situations. Analysts identify and monitor developing issues or trends in order to narrow down the influences in those developments. The analysis results are then used to better prepare policymakers to make decisions.

In order to be an asset to the policymaking process, the IC needs to provide specialized expertise that the policy community lacks. As Carmen Medina explains, “analysts today have to add value in an era of information abundance.” An analyst can make a difference not only by establishing credibility, but also by providing context. By examining elements of an opponent’s society—like values, culture, and history—it puts political behavior into context, making its significance more clear. In addition to the depth of knowledge brought to conventional issues, the IC can go beyond political—and, in some cases, economic—analysis into “nontraditional” emerging issues like weapons proliferation, terrorism, and crime; a place where the IC can more easily distinguish itself and demonstrate a comparative advantage in intelligence analysis. It is in these areas that the IC can develop a sound basis for credibility in the area of intelligence beyond the independent capacity of policymakers.
Role of the Policymaker in the Intelligence Process

In the US, intelligence agencies were created to support many customers, including the President, National Security Council, military commanders, other officials in major government departments, and law enforcement agencies. Since the armed forces and some law enforcement agencies often use the intelligence they receive to take action, these parties may more appropriately be considered policy “implementers” than policy “makers.” For the purposes of this article, “policymaker” will refer to those who are in the position to affect policy decisions. In this sense, the IC is the producer of intelligence and the policymaker is the consumer.

The role of the policymaker begins with a request to the IC for intelligence. Yet the policymaker’s role does not, and should not, end here. Policymakers are present throughout the intelligence cycle, continuously giving feedback to help shape the intelligence needs. It is this guidance that gives the IC direction for establishing the best collection strategies and intelligence production methods. Without this, intelligence has no indication of what is useful to the policymaker. Allowing an analyst to establish requirements creates the potential for the “self-licking ice cream cone” phenomenon, where products are interesting to the producer but not necessarily of any use to the consumer.

Because the intelligence effort derives both focus and impetus from consumers’ declarations of interest, complications may arise if consumers grow complacent or become too involved in the process. Experienced intelligence officials agree that one of the most striking and persistent deficiencies affecting intelligence production is insufficient guidance from the policymaker. This problem most commonly stems from officials’ reluctance to devote attention on a continuing, priority basis to tomorrow’s issues as well as today’s. If policymakers do not periodically seek data and analyses pertaining to the requested topic, or do not make intelligence requirements clear, issues can slide into low-priority status as more pressing matters come to absorb the time and attention of intelligence officials. On the other hand, as a community of experts, the IC is expected to highlight new, relevant events and trends for the policymaker, and needs to remain mindful of such indicators.

Communication between the intelligence and policymaking communities does not always work smoothly. Policymakers, broadly speaking, do not have a single, formalized method for conveying intelligence requirements to the Intelligence Community. In tactical level units in the military, this process is easy: intelligence personnel are embedded in the unit, working alongside operators, where communication is an ongoing dialogue. At the policy level, policymakers are distanced in two ways: hierarchically, with several levels above the analyst; and geographically, by sitting across town in another agency.
Similarly, with each new administration the role of intelligence changes for the policymaker. Each consumer has slightly different requirements than the next, and these differences must be clearly articulated to assist the analyst in obtaining relevant data. Again, these needs must also be prioritized, so the intelligence analyst is not left playing “daily triage” to pressing national security issues.\textsuperscript{17} If the declaration and prioritization of needs is left up to the IC, this leaves the policymaker out of the intelligence cycle. The IC could only guess at the needs of the policymaker, creating products the consumer may find useless and unnecessary.

In sum, the policymaker must actively play a role throughout the intelligence process. Continuous feedback during the intelligence cycle, particularly during the analysis and dissemination stages, is necessary to ensure the product meets policymaker needs.

\textbf{Rise of the Information Age}

Today intelligence information is easily accessed, making today’s policymakers more aware of issues than in the past. This is particularly true in the open source arena. Foreign and domestic newspapers, periodicals, professional networks, and email allow policymakers to stay informed about current events like never before. “Stove-piped” information finds its way directly to the policymaker, but not the IC. Today policymakers also have access to classified, unrefined intelligence data, a change from how it used to be 20 or 30 years ago. These technological advances allow policymakers to read raw traffic alongside analysts, instead of waiting for the highlights from the IC.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, the volume of information available today from collection methods is overwhelming to analysts, who continually sort the “wheat” from the “chaff,” trying to find intelligence-worthy information relevant to national security policy.

Martin Peterson sees policymakers as more confident than before, using political savvy, confidence in political judgment, and networking skills to create a personal political analysis. As one expert explains, “policymakers may or may not question the physics that underpin the missile report or the numbers that support the economic outlook item, but they will argue politics.”\textsuperscript{19} The abundance and availability of information has led many policymakers to believe they can be their own analysts, rendering them skeptical of the value of intelligence products. By eliminating the IC from the intelligence process, policymakers sacrifice context and broad interpretations for highly specialized and narrow knowledge of an issue that can lead to less-informed decision-making.\textsuperscript{20}

Some blame the IC for allowing policymakers to circumvent the traditional intelligence process. In a Center for the Study of Intelligence Roundtable Report, experts from the intelligence and policy communities discussed whether the IC was making the most of its resources. The IC identifies the shortcoming:

There’s too much information. The volume is so great that any policymaker who believes that he can look at that and come up with good answers is a
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fool. And you ought not to provide them with intelligence anyway. But the problem is that the Intelligence Community hasn’t recognized that as well. Shame on us if we can’t do better than policymakers. We can get more information out of what we’re collecting; we’re just not doing it. To correct for this deficiency, the IC needs to dig deeper to surpass the customer’s knowledge, abilities, and resources. Between policymakers and the IC there has been a blurring of responsibilities, with policymakers doing more for themselves and the IC not producing value added products. While this problem has been recognized, steps still need to be taken to rectify the situation; however, simply responding to these changing roles does not eliminate a more prevalent and difficult problem: the problem of the individual.

Misperception and Mindsets

In addition to understanding the roles of producers and consumers of intelligence, it is crucial to understand the way that mindsets of both groups influence the production and consumption of intelligence. Mindsets present a psychological bias that can impact intelligence. Mindsets are known by many names, including cognitive predispositions, analytic assumptions, and mental models. Acting as a lens through which one sees the world, a mindset can distort information and lead to misperception of intentions and events. Such distortions include inaccurate inferences, miscalculated consequences, and misjudged reactions. People take in information based on what they know or what they have previously experienced. When new, unrelated information is encountered, the mind may subconsciously discard or misinterpret either the event or the significance of the event.

In “Hypotheses on Misperception” Robert Jervis sees this as a problem of decision-makers in international relations, calling it his first hypothesis. Decision-makers take in information based on existing theories and images that directly impact what they see, where “actors tend to perceive what they expect.” Still, Jervis cautions not to lay blame entirely with the policymaker, as interpretations depend on the evidence made available. In the case of the intelligence process, this could be the result of the IC failing to provide relevant information in a timely manner.

Another prevalent writer on the link of psychological bias and politics is Janice Gross Stein. In “Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat” Stein argues the need to see psychological explanations of threat perception in international relations, referencing Jervis’s hypotheses. The most significant aspect is the impact of leaders’ expectations and beliefs. Individuals use existing mental frameworks or “schematas” developed in the past to understand new information and reconcile it with existing knowledge. Cognitive predispositions can confuse the perception of threat, and she cites studies of how cognitive framework and bias can “color” perspective. This can be applied to both the intelligence professional collecting information and compiling reports, and the policymaker taking in final
intelligence products and influencing whether current events are perceived as threats.

These psychological expectations stem from personal events, professional experiences, and cultural and organizational norms—all of which influence how one takes in and interprets information. Intelligence failures are often attributed to assumptions and estimates based on biases of the intelligence professional or how intelligence is understood and used on the policymaker’s side. Mindsets can also influence an individual’s overall outlook. One policymaker notes that while most policymakers have a tendency toward optimism, the IC is generally pessimistic in nature. The IC will lean toward over-warning, fearing criticism if they fail to predict an event. The worst outcome for the IC would be failure to report a major event, as the IC was accused in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Mindsets can become cemented over time, further reinforcing what an individual expects to encounter. Although useful to get through volumes of new information, policymakers and analysts may come to rely on their mindsets for too long and not recognize when it is time to adjust or update their outlook.

One risky type of cognitive distortion is mirror-imaging, or filling in missing information about an opponent with one’s own values, intentions, and motivations. An analyst may instinctively project a personal perspective to fill in the intelligence gaps. This would ignore the opponent’s unique ideas and values that may constitute a different approach to an issue. The danger here is that people around the world have different cultures, and hence different perspectives.

For example, in 1998 India surprised the world by testing its first nuclear weapon. Admiral David Jeremiah, who headed the commission to investigate what happened, blamed prevailing “everybody thinks like us” mindset at the CIA for the missed indicators of the test: “Why would they hazard [economic advantages] when there’s no reason to do that? We don’t think like the other nation thinks.”

Mirror-imaging not only includes how the citizens of a state think, but also occurs at the international level regarding how a state perceives its national interest, potentially influencing the identification of potential threats. When an analyst has no other way to find out a state’s motivation and strategy, mirror-imaging may be the only alternative. It should not, however, be relied upon and should be used cautiously.

### Politicization

Another major problem inherent in the informal relationship between the policymaker and the IC is the politicization of intelligence. Politicization of intelligence refers to the influence of partisan, bureaucratic, and personal politics on intelligence analysis. This “act of intellectual corruption” can stem from both the policymaker and the intelligence analyst.

Politicization flowing downward occurs in the form of the policymaker expressing to an analyst the expected result and outcome, thereby directly
or indirectly forcing analytical conclusions. In his 2006 assessment “Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq” Robert Jervis mentions one possible case of politicization in Iraq, by which the IC was “illegitimately influenced” by its knowledge of the policymakers’ desired outcome. This is the reverse of how the process should happen “as intelligence informs policy.”

Furthermore, as mentioned previously many policymakers consider themselves analysts with the same, and sometimes additional, personal resources as the IC. “Stove-piping” of raw data directly to the policymaker misses the input of the intelligence analyst, who is educated and trained to provide added value and critical evaluation of the information. Policymakers can also be guilty of “cherry-picking” or finding evidence to support a policy and overlooking any other related information. Jervis highlights “the crudest” politicization as changing reports to conform to policy, as confirmed in post-Iraq reports of analysts being pressured on WMD.

Many fault the IC with politicization, calling it a breach of professionalism. As with the policymaker, politicization within the IC can be a serious issue. Analysts who carve out information to fit a specific outcome are guilty of upward politicization. Intelligence products cannot effectively support the policymaking process if they are not comprehensive products that include all relevant intelligence. “Cherry-picking” evidence instead of including all available intelligence can both support and subvert a predetermined policy outcome, warping the standards of objectivity. In addition, intelligence professionals may let their own personal biases enter into many parts of the intelligence cycle, from tasking collection assets to synthesizing all-source intelligence into a final product. Either way, the outcome is not the close, professional support the IC seeks to create. Well-published in the analyst-policymaker relationship, Jack Davis equates politicization to slow decay: “whatever its roots, it erodes confidence in the integrity of analysis, at times on the part of colleague analysts, at times on the part of policy officials.”

Intelligence analysts are not entitled to personal opinions—an argument can only be properly supported through facts and findings. An analyst must be wary of digressing toward upward politicization, focusing on what the analyst personally believes is important and then seeking out supporting facts and findings. An effect of this digression from the policymaker’s stated needs can lead policymakers to “jerk” the system and refocus intelligence analysis efforts. To an analyst, such a shift can also be considered a form of downward politicization.

Conclusion

In order to facilitate a strong relationship between producers and consumers of intelligence, both sides must recognize the importance of their expectations and existing limitations. Timely, reliable intelligence cannot insure against ineffective or poorly-implemented policy. Intelligence is meant to inform policymakers to help them make appropriate decisions on policy. If
the policymaker does not understand the role of intelligence—or just ignores it—policy is made in the dark.

This article creates a framework to help evaluate the role of intelligence in the policymaking process. The wave of information technology in recent years has brought with it an information boom never before seen, through intelligence collection tools, foreign and domestic news publications, the Internet, email, and personal relationships. These tools allow conclusions to be reached by the policymaker without consulting with the IC. This pushes the IC to establish analytic credibility to the consumer. Cognitive processing affects the way the mind takes in information. This can impact how the intelligence analyst creates assessments and how the policymaker approaches policy decisions. In particular, mirror-imaging occurs when an analyst fills in unknown gaps of information by assuming an opponent approaches all issues the same as the analyst or policymaker would. Finally, political, bureaucratic, and partisan politics can lead to politicization of intelligence from both directions. These distinct influences of the policymaker and the intelligence professional highlight the hidden role of intelligence in the policymaking process. This new framework gives further insight into answering why states do what they do.

Notes

12 Lowenthal, Intelligence, 8.
13 Lowenthal, Intelligence, 174.
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17 Lowenthal, Intelligence, 177.
19 Petersen, “The Challenge for the Political Analyst,” https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-
study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol47no1/article05.html.
20 Center for the Study of Intelligence, “Intelligence and Policy,” 2.
21 Center for the Study of Intelligence, “Intelligence and Policy,” 1–2.
22 Medina, “When Traditional Models Fail,” 419.
Study of Intelligence, 1999, xxii.
25 Ibid., 460.
26 Stein, Janice Gross. “Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat.” Political
Psychology, 9, no. 2 (June 1998), 245, 248–249.
27 Heuer, Jr., Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, 9.
28 Center for the Study of Intelligence, “Intelligence and Policy,” 4. See also George, Roger
Z. “Fixing the Problem of Analytical Mindsets: Alternative Analysis.” In Intelligence and the
National Security Strategist: Enduring Issues and Challenges, edited by Roger Z. George and Robert
29 Center for the Study of Intelligence, “Intelligence and Policy,” 3.
30 George, “Analytical Mindsets,” 312.
31 Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). “Caught Off Guard: A NewsHour with Jim Lehrer
32 Heuer, Jr., Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, 70–71.
33 Davis, Jack. “Defining the Analytic Mission: Facts, Findings, Forecasts, and Fortunetell-
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34 Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Analysis and Production, “The Role of
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35 Jervis, Robert. “Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq.” The Journal
of Strategic Studies 29, no. 1 (February 2006), 6.
36 Jervis, “Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures,” 34.
38 Ibid., 297–98.