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At Arm's Length or At the Elbow?: Explaining the Distance between Analysts and Decisionmakers

Differences in decisionmaking culture provide a plausible explanation for variations in proximity between intelligence analysis and decisionmaking. Specifically, the United States national security decisionmaking culture is both hierarchical and adversarial. This tends to keep all-source intelligence analysts at arm's length from national decisionmakers. The distance between the two is also legitimized by a myth embedded in intelligence culture highlighting the importance of its "separation" from decisionmaking. By way of contrast, the more collegial and collaborative British decisionmaking culture has brought intelligence closer to the elbow of decisionmakers. These differences in proximity matter because relative proximity between intelligence analysis and decisionmaking affects each country's ability to effectively integrate intelligence analysis into the policy process. For example, the United Kingdom has created an organizational mechanism that facilitates the incorporation of intelligence information and analysis into decisionmaking. A similar mechanism in the United States that takes into account the peculiarities of the adversarial

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decisionmaking culture might enable the U.S. to better integrate its intelligence analysis into the decisionmaking process.

VARIATIONS IN PROXIMITY

Proximity can be defined as the relative distance between intelligence analysis and national security decisionmaking. In terms of national security decisionmaking, functional differentiation between the information acquisition, assessment, and implementation tasks have led to a variety of intelligence and policymaking organizations that capitalize on efficiencies arising from organizational economies of scale and scope. Even though intelligence analysis or assessment can take place in both intelligence and policymaking organizations, a focal point within the decisionmaking process develops where the implications of intelligence information are considered prior to beginning the process of thinking through what to do about them. That distance between this organizational focal point and the decisionmaking process is the subject here.¹

The relative proximity of intelligence analysis and decisionmaking can vary among countries, but a distinction should be made between intelligence agencies that are affiliated with policymaking departments and those that are independent of them.

In the United States, eleven of the twelve Intelligence Community organizations that produce all-source analysis are affiliated with policymaking departments. These organizations include the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), the Defense Department's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and other military service-oriented intelligence units. Because of their organizational affiliation, they have frequent interaction with departmental decisionmakers and planners, which means they are in relatively close proximity to decisionmakers.

But British intelligence analysis is even closer to decisionmaking because, for the most part, the United Kingdom lacks intelligence analysts. Instead, most analysis is done by the decisionmakers themselves.² As the British intelligence scholar Michael Herman points out, "The American system makes a fairly clear distinction between intelligence and policy players; intelligence is an independent input to policy. The British system is more elastic."³ Another intelligence scholar, Philip Davies, observes, "In British practice, raw intelligence moves straight into policymaking circles without passing through a separate intervening analytical stage."⁴ According to Professor Davies, "This is not because there is no assessment process but because all-source analysis is subsumed by the civil service employees who, in their role as advisors to ministers of the crown, take ultimate responsibility for the policies and actions of their departments before

Parliament.”⁵ Michael Herman also points out, “In practice, (policy ministries, with the exception of Defense) do not have distinct intelligence branches, being represented by policy-makers and not intelligence specialists.”⁶ In other words, notes Davies, “While US intelligence analysis is professionalized, in British practice it is really no more than the ordinary work of government departments and ministries.”⁷

In addition, even British intelligence organizations that are independent of policymaking departments are closer to decisionmaking than their U.S. counterparts. The United States possesses departmentally independent intelligence organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Intelligence Council (NIC) that provide intelligence to the entire policy community in addition to their primary consumers, the President and his advisors on the National Security Council staff. These organizations are both geographically and organizationally separated from the decisionmakers, and provide intelligence analysis in primarily paper format supplemented with oral briefings.^{8,9} As a result, both the CIA and the NIC are relatively distant from decisionmaking because of their independence from policy and their delivery of finished intelligence primarily in written form.

By way of contrast, the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) assessments are almost completely integrated into decisionmaking. This is because the JIC is an interdepartmental Cabinet Office staff made up of officials from both intelligence and policy organizations, that integrates intelligence into decisionmaking at the national/strategic level primarily through weekly meetings and other forms of personal interaction.^{10,11} According to Herman, the JIC’s “intelligence assessments are clearly distinct from policy papers, but their production has a mixed intelligence and policy cast. . . . The JIC and its [Current Intelligence Groups] are partly meetings of intelligence professionals, but partly also a means of ‘gathering the voices’ within government as a whole. Unlike the American system, what they produce is arguably not really ‘intelligence assessment,’ but just ‘assessment.’”¹²

In the end, the British practice of intelligence assessment tends to be closer to actual decisionmaking than is U.S. intelligence analysis, regardless of whether the analysis or assessment-producing entity is affiliated with policymaking departments or independent of them. The question that needs to be answered, then, is why do proximity differences exist between the U.S. and the UK regarding intelligence and decisionmaking?

ATTRIBUTING VARIATIONS TO THE DECISIONMAKING CULTURE

Differences in proximity between intelligence and decisionmaking in the U.S. and UK may be caused by differences in their decisionmaking cultures.

The effects of culture—or the unwritten incentive structure that shapes behavior by implicitly defining norms and expectations—can be measured at different levels of analysis. For states, the topic is strategic culture. For societies, popular culture. For organizations, organizational culture. Obviously, these various cultures affect the behavior of individuals in different ways.

Culture can be used to explain variations of intelligence practices in different countries. Even though the tasks performed by intelligence agencies across countries are similar, the UK's Philip Davies has observed that intelligence practices can vary by country because their differing cultures provide “influences, orientations and expectations that cannot be reduced to the internal logic of those tasks.”¹³ Similarly, intelligence scholar Kevin O'Connell has observed that nations may have different intelligence “styles”—or cultures—resulting from “their societal, political, and historical context” which affect how they collect and analyze intelligence.¹⁴ As Professor Davies observes, this can be the case even when those “societal, political, and historical contexts” are similar, as is the case with the U.S. and the UK which “share very common methods, technologies and resources and have closely aligned political cultures and histories...[yet]...one can still find between them profound and consistent differences” despite their similarities.¹⁵

Intelligence culture can also be shaped by broader environmental factors. Since intelligence analysts operate within an environment dominated by the culture of the decisionmakers and those who consume finished intelligence products, this broader decisionmaking culture—including its own set of unwritten rules, expectations and norms—can influence how intelligence analysis is produced and disseminated. Ultimately the differences in the U.S. and the UK national security and foreign policy decisionmaking culture arising from variations in the underlying rules of decisionmaking—both explicit and implicit—shape how information and intelligence is perceived and used, and can be used to explain why proximity between intelligence and decisionmaking differs between the two countries.

Sociological Institutionalism

The theory of sociological institutionalism may explain the importance of this decisionmaking culture in influencing the operations of intelligence organizations and their proximity to decisionmaking. In the classic model of organizations, organizational structure and processes are rationally designed to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. By way of contrast, sociological institutionalists argue that organizations “adopt features because they are seen as appropriate or legitimate within the cultural context, even if they are not efficient ways of satisfying actors' goals.”¹⁶ These scholars emphasize the importance of ideas and informal cultural practices, which they call

“institutions,” as explanations for apparently inefficient organizational behavior. According to political scientist Sven Steinmo,

Institutions are simply rules. As such, they are the foundation for all political behavior. Some are formal (as in constitutional rules), some are informal (as in cultural norms), but without institutions there could be no organized politics. Indeed, absent institutions there could be no organization at all.¹⁷

Sociological institutionalists frequently use the transmission and adoption of institutions or culture as an explanation for organizational similarities, but the same approach can also be used to explain organizational differences. According to an academic Website,

Sociological institutionalists challenge the commonly accepted view that the selection of the most efficient structures and procedures leads to organizational similarities. In contrast, sociological institutionalists argue that organizational convergence is best explained by cultural factors.¹⁸

Alternatively, in cases of organizational divergence, even though the most efficient structure or procedure would appear to lead to organizational similarities, the divergence can be explained according to variations in institutions or culture. Specifically, the variations in proximity between intelligence and decisionmaking in the U.S. and the UK can be attributable to variations in the decisionmaking cultures.

Moving up the Ladder

In the United States, decisionmaking is hierarchical, with the President at the top. Interagency national security decisionmaking is frequently an adversarial process, with the heads of the various departments providing conflicting advice to the President regarding what to do and how to do it.¹⁹ This process, known as multiple advocacy, exists to different degrees in different administrations.²⁰ Some Presidents prefer that these kinds of disputes be resolved at a lower level or by trusted advisors, while others prefer that they be brought up at meetings and openly debated. Nonetheless, in both cases the process is adversarial, and decided through a hierarchical process that ends with the President.

This adversarial approach to decisionmaking leads to greater distance between intelligence agencies and decisionmakers because of how information is used in the decisionmaking process. As Columbia University Professor Robert Jervis pointed out in 1991, information is “often used, not to shed light on issues, but as tools of persuasion, if not as weapons with which to beat adversaries within the government over the head.”²¹

Decisionmakers do not always appreciate all-source analysis, whether it comes from independent analytic organizations such as CIA's Directorate of Intelligence or departmentally-affiliated organizations such as State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. This is because the interpretation of information—otherwise known as analysis or assessments—can be a critical component of the interagency disputes over policy, with departmental advocates for each policy putting forth their best case for the President to decide. Intelligence agencies can be perceived as intervening in the policy process by providing alternative interpretations of the intelligence that appears to support the position of one of the sides in the policy debate.

This impact of adversarial decisionmaking on intelligence was framed very effectively by Anne Armstrong—a former head of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB)—who observed that

the intelligence community must provide more than mere facts, yet its interpretations and estimates are often uncertain and subject to reasonable disagreement. In addition, no one strategy can be best from every point of view. They all have potential costs as well as benefits, none will necessarily appear reasonable from every possible interpretation of the facts of the situation. A piece of intelligence, or one analyst's interpretation of it, will always be available that will make the chosen policy look debatable. . . .(I)nstead of functioning to help make decisions, the intelligence community's assessments often become ammunition for opponents of any policy line attempting to block its implementation or arguing for its reconsideration.²²

She went on to point out that “the policy struggle continues even after the initial decision is made, and new intelligence information or assessments may serve as important ammunition for those who lost the original skirmish and wish to resume the battle.”²³

Conflict between Providers and Users

So even though intelligence analysis does not advocate what decisionmakers should do, the assessment process alone can support any particular position in the policymaking process, and can even contradict decided policy by pointing out that it is weak or may fail. The informal code of ethics adopted by intelligence analysts—in essence consisting of both independence and objectivity—leads to analysis and assessments that can be unwelcome to those policy advocates whose positions are undercut. As Columbia University Professor Robert Jervis has pointed out,

Intelligence can point out to all domestic combatants the weaknesses and flaws in the arguments and information that are being relied upon.

Intelligence . . . keep(s) the players honest, not permitting disreputable arguments to thrive, pointing out where positions are internally contradictory or rest on tortured readings of the evidence.²⁴

But this role as an “objective” provider of information can lead to conflict between intelligence analysts and decisionmakers. As former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Robert M. Gates observed, “Although most journalists and academicians focus on alleged distortions of intelligence to support policy, the players know that the relationship actually is often characterized by disagreement on substance and suspicion of motives.”²⁵ Accordingly, this potential for conflict is apparently why U.S. intelligence agencies have historically been kept at arm’s length from decisionmaking. Accordingly, Roger Hilsman, who headed the State Department’s INR during the John Kennedy administration, could observe as early as 1953 that in the U.S. “intelligence on the one hand and policy-making and action on the other are separated physically, organizationally, chronologically, functionally, and by skills—separated in every possible way.”²⁶

The UK’s Broader Collegiality

By way of contrast, the United Kingdom’s national security decisionmaking is decentralized rather than hierarchical, and frequently collegial rather than adversarial, and these combine to push intelligence analysis and decisionmaking closer together. According to Philip Davies, “The decentralization of power in the British cabinet system is undoubtedly a factor in the decentralization of all-source analysis, much as executive centralization under the US presidency influences the centralization of analysis.”²⁷ He has also observed that in the UK “individual [policy] departments [are] highly autonomous in their formulation of policy, and their power [is] highly centralized in the Cabinet.” As a result, “ministers and civil servants have traditionally held a proprietary attitude towards analysis and decision-making enhanced by the very small size of the UK central government.” Accordingly, “Centralized analysis is anathema to the twin doctrines of ministerial responsibility and the constitutional role of the civil service under British parliamentary democracy.”²⁸ This explains why most intelligence analysis and assessment is conducted by Britain’s decisionmakers rather than by its intelligence analysts.

Where intelligence analysis takes place separately from decisionmaking, as is the case with both the Defence Intelligence Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee, the integration of the analysis into decisionmaking is facilitated by the collegial and collaborative aspects of British national security decisionmaking. Davies argues that these tendencies toward collaboration are not the result of fewer issues for British policy departments to disagree

about because “the Home Office, Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office in the UK are as likely to overlap and experience friction about cross-jurisdictional problems as the Departments of Justice, Defense, and State in the United States.” But instead of the level of conflict generated in internal U.S. government policy debates, British policy departments have a greater “ability or willingness to subordinate personal or departmental self-interest to interdepartmental consensus for the sake of consensus. . . . Collegiality is so endemic to the British defence and security apparatus that [intelligence scholar Michael] Herman can describe the Cabinet Office Joint Intelligence Committee as basically ‘symptomatic’ of ‘British interdepartmentalism.’”²⁹

In the end, this collegial approach to decisionmaking leads to greater proximity between Britain’s intelligence agencies and decisionmakers than in the U.S. because of how information is used in the decisionmaking process.

MYTHS REINFORCING DISTANCE

In the United States, the distance between intelligence and decisionmaking has been legitimized and reinforced by a myth that is embedded in intelligence culture.³⁰ Many intelligence analysts possess an idealized conception of the national security decisionmaking process in which intelligence analysis is both a precursor to and a primary information source for decisionmaking. Implicit in the intelligence literature, the ideal intelligence production and delivery process consists of objective intelligence analysts not affected by partisan biases or decisionmaker preferences producing intelligence in an environment of minimal organizational complexity, and delivering it to policymakers who objectively evaluate alternatives in a linear decisionmaking process to protect national security and advance national interests. They also conceive of an interaction between the two that integrates information seamlessly.

According to the late intelligence scholar, Professor Michael Handel of the Naval War College,

It has often . . . been assumed that intelligence work can be pursued by professional, detached experts working within an objective environment, and that they will be able to present the truth, as best they can determine it, to the policymakers. The policymakers in this scenario will of course recognize the quality and relevance of the data provided them, and will use this information in the best interest of their country (as they identify it).³¹

Columbia University’s Richard Betts also highlights the importance of distance between intelligence analysis and decisionmaking in this idealized process as a way to ensure objectivity when he observes that “One of the

longest-standing articles of faith among many theorists of intelligence is that analysis must be segregated from policymaking. Otherwise, analysts' independence will be compromised and their conclusions will begin to pander to what leaders want to hear."³²

According to the myth, then, the distance between intelligence analysts and decisionmakers is in fact a protective mechanism to prevent decisionmakers from politicizing finished intelligence. According to Hans Heymann,

in the catechism of the intelligence officer, the thesis that intelligence is and should be strictly separate from policy is taken as axiomatic. It is as hallowed in the theology of intelligence as the doctrine of the separation of church and state is in the U.S. Constitution. For much of our early history we tended, somewhat self-righteously, to view intelligence as objective, disinterested, and dispassionate and, somewhat disdainfully, to regard policy as slanted, adulterated, and politicized. We strove mightily to maintain the much touted arm-length relationship with policy, believing that proximity to policy would corrupt the independence of our intelligence judgments.³³

Yet the idealized intelligence/decisionmaking process does not describe national security decisionmaking very well in practice. According to Professor Handel, "This 'purely rational decision-making model' and belief in the viability of a 'strictly professional intelligence process' is nothing but an idealized normative fiction."³⁴ There are two primary reasons why this is the case.

An Idealistic Objectivity

First, intelligence analysis is not and cannot be objective in an absolute sense, and even if it could be objective, practical reasons determine why that may not be such a good thing. Analytic objectivity in an absolute sense is not achievable because biases consisting of cognitive frameworks are necessary in order to infer meaning from incomplete data. As Richard Betts maintained,

Some degree of bias is inevitable. . . . [Bias] simply means the general view of international reality, the set of assumptions that any analyst has about how the world works, the notions that form the complex of intellectual shortcuts that help analysts make sense out of information. Good analysts will question their own biases and revise them in the face of contrary evidence, but they cannot get along without some set of working assumptions.³⁵

Also, objective intelligence may not necessarily be a good thing because decisionmakers will likely reject information that does not conform to their underlying sense of how the world works, and any intelligence analysis

that is not used by decisionmakers might as well not even exist. As Betts observed, some object to the strict separation of intelligence and decisionmaking as “an unrealistic application of ‘pure science’ norms to areas where fact and value are inseparable and judgment must preside” possibly resulting in a failure to provide “the topical kinds of analyses that consumers need, offering good but irrelevant estimates.”³⁶

Second, the ideal intelligence/policy process frequently does not exist. The policy process can be a messy affair, with intelligence analysis as only one of many information streams that the policymaker listens to, and it may not be the most important. National security decisionmakers also have access to raw intelligence which their staffs mine for significance, in effect duplicating the role of intelligence analysts. Also, decisionmaker staffs acquire information from other sources, and sometimes these other sources are more accurate, better placed, or frame the issue in terms more amenable to the policymaker’s policy preferences. As former DCI Gates noted, for national security decisionmakers intelligence “is just one of a number of sources of information” and it “must compete for [the decisionmakers’] time and attention” against “vast and varied nonintelligence sources on which he also relies and in which he often has considerable confidence.”³⁷ In addition, a policymaker’s decisions may be influenced by the same partisan, ideological, and parochial concerns that drive many aspects of domestic policy. According to Leon Fuerth—National Security Advisor to former Vice President Al Gore—policymaking is neither orderly nor sequential, and a lot depends on the policymaker making room for intelligence by suspending judgment until the intelligence is available.³⁸ If the policymaker does not do so, then the idealized intelligence/decisionmaking process cannot exist.

In the end, intelligence analysis provides some of the information used by policymakers to make decisions, but does not play the central role that is prevalent in the intelligence culture. In fact, the combination of distance and objectivity can combine to marginalize the influence of intelligence analysis on decisionmaking. Yet many intelligence analysts and managers continue to believe in the myth that intelligence should remain distant from decisionmaking, due likely to their possession of a normative belief that intelligence should be a precursor to and foundation for decisionmaking. This myth may be all the stronger because it also exaggerates the importance of intelligence analysis in national security decisionmaking, thus creating a self-reinforcing mechanism.

THE COMMUNICATIONS GAP PERSISTS

Unfortunately for the United States, the persistent distance between intelligence analysts and decisionmakers at the level of the National

Security Council staff and higher has led to numerous incidents of miscommunications that at times have contributed to both policymaker surprise and intelligence failures.³⁹ Some of these miscommunications can be attributed to the different roles that intelligence analysts and policymakers play in the decisionmaking process.⁴⁰ But a failure to create mechanisms to overcome these differences will result in additional communication difficulties and miscommunications between both individuals and—if aggregated—organizations. In the broadest sense, integrating the intelligence and decisionmaking functions requires some aspect of proximity such as organizational affiliation, frequency of contact, and delivery mechanisms that integrate the intelligence into decisionmaking. But implementation of these possible remedies is hindered by the myth of the contributions that objective intelligence analysts play in an ideal decisionmaking process.

Distance May Be Unnecessary

A separation between intelligence and decisionmaking may be necessary because of economies of scale and scope, but separation alone does not mean intelligence must be distant from decisionmaking. According to Michael Herman, the British possess

the same underlying assumption that a proper 'intelligence' structure, separated from 'policy,' is a prerequisite of good decision-making. The general view is that, through the joint intelligence system developed in the Second World War, Britain has somehow found the knack of welding [information and intelligence acquired overseas]...into an effective 'intelligence' whole.⁴¹

In other words, the British may have found a mechanism based on their more collaborative culture that enables them to deliver intelligence products that are not just relevant because of close proximity to decisionmaking but accurate as well. Perhaps a similar approach—an American equivalent to the JIC—might be useful as a way to close the distance between intelligence analysts and decisionmakers without necessarily compromising analytic independence along the way.

In the end, closing the distance between intelligence analysis and decisionmaking in the United States—and thereby improving the integration of intelligence analysis into policymaking—will require that intelligence analysts possess a more realistic understanding of their role in decisionmaking than is currently prevalent in intelligence culture, and work within the broader hierarchical decisionmaking culture to improve the analytic support that decisionmakers get from intelligence analysts.

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- ⁶ Michael Herman, “Assessment Machinery,” p. 28.
- ⁷ Philip H. J. Davies, “Ideas of Intelligence,” p. 63.
- ⁸ For more information on the NIC, see: NIC Website: http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC_about.html. Also see: Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Peering Into The Future.” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1994, pp. 82–93.
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