

What Should We Expect of Intelligence?

By Gregory F. Treverton

When I ran the process that produced America's National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), I took comfort when I was told that predictions of continuity beat any weather forecaster— if it was fine, predict fine weather until it rained, then predict rain until it turned fine. I mused, if those forecasters, replete with data, theory and history, can't predict the weather, how can they expect us to predict a complicated human event like the collapse of the Soviet Union? The question behind the musing was what should people expect of their intelligence agencies? Not what they'd like, for policymakers would like perfect prescience if not omniscience, though they know they can have neither.

The Power of "Story"

Reasonably, expectations should differ across different intelligence problems. But start with that hoary Soviet case: should intelligence services have done better in foreseeing the end of the Soviet Union? After all, the premise of the West's containment strategy was that if Soviet expansion were contained, eventually the empire would collapse from its own internal contradictions. So some monitoring of how that policy was doing would have seemed appropriate.

In retrospect, there were signs aplenty of a sick society. Emigrés arrived with tales of Soviet toasters that were as likely to catch fire as to brown bread. The legendary demographer, Murray Feshbach, came back to Washington in the mid-1970s with a raft of Soviet demographics, most of which, like male life expectancy, were going in the wrong direction for a rich country. These factoids were puzzling, but we rationalized the first on the grounds that the Soviet defense industry was special and apart from ordinary Soviet industry; the second we dismissed with "Russians drink too much" or some such. Emmanuel Todd did Feshbach one better and turned the demographic numbers into a prediction of the Soviet Union's collapse. But he suffered the double misfortune of not only being, but also writing in French, and so was not likely to make much of a dent in official Washington.

Intelligence is about creating and adjusting stories – or so it has come to seem to me in a career as a producer and consumer of intelligence – and in the 1970s and into the 1980s, the story in the heads of policymakers was Soviet expansion abroad, not disintegration at home. Thus, those Feshbach statistics were just curious factoids. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Evil Empire and "star wars" were still in the future. Imagine an intelligence officer who had tried to explain to the newly elected Ronald Reagan that the Soviet problem he faced was not power but impending collapse. That analyst would soon have found himself counting Soviet submarines in the Aleutian Islands. Questions not asked or stories not imagined by policy are not likely to be answered or developed by intelligence.

The best point prediction of Soviet implosion I have seen was a slightly whimsical piece written by the British columnist, Bernard Levin, in September 1977. He got the process exactly right: change would come not from the bottom but from the top, from Soviet leaders who “are in every respect model Soviet functionaries. Or rather, in every respect but one: they have admitted the truth about their country to themselves, and have vowed, also to themselves, to do something about it.” Levin didn’t get the motivation of the high-level revolutionaries right – he imagined a deep-seated lust for freedom, rather than concern over the stagnating Soviet economy – but at least he had a story. For the sake of convenience, he picked the 200th anniversary of the French revolution as the date – July 14, 1989.

Closer to the end, CIA assessments were on the mark but still lacked for a story. The Agency had been pointing to a chronic slowdown in the Soviet economy since the 1970s, and a 1981 report was blunt: “The Soviet pattern in many respects conforms to that of a less developed country. There is remarkably little progress toward a more modern pattern.” By 1982, CIA assessments concluded that Soviet defense spending had stopped growing, and the next year revised their previous assessments, concluding that defense spending had tailed off beginning in 1976.

Interestingly, those who could imagine the story didn’t believe it could be true. Unlike Levin, they did not believe the Soviet Union could be reformed from the top. And in that they turned out to be right. The director of America’s eavesdroppers, the National Security Agency, Lt. Gen. William Odom wrote in 1987 that the Mikhail Gorbachev’s program, if followed to its logical conclusion, would lead to Gorbachev’s political suicide and the collapse of the system. Because this did not seem what Gorbachev had in mind, he and others, including Robert Gates, then the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, concluded that Gorbachev could not intend to do what he said he would.

In fact, the Soviet Union didn’t have to end in 1991. Indeed, it might still be doddering along today but for the actions of that visionary bumbler, Mikhail Gorbachev, who understood his nation’s weakness but had no idea how to deal with it, and so set in motion an economic reform program that was pain for not much gain. What we could have expected of intelligence is not prediction but earlier and better monitoring of internal shortcomings. We could also have expected some imaginings of competing stories to the then prevailing one. Very late, in 1990, an NIE, *The Deepening Crisis in the USSR*, did just that, laying out four different scenarios, or stories, for the next year.

Puzzles and Mysteries

When the Soviet Union would collapse was a mystery, not a puzzle. No one could know the answer. It depended. It was contingent. Puzzles are a very different kind of intelligence problem. They have an answer, but we may not know it. Many of the intelligence successes of the Cold War were puzzle-solving about a very secretive foe: Were there Soviet missiles in Cuba? How many warheads did the Soviet SS-18 missile carry?

Puzzles are not necessarily easier than mysteries – consider the decade it took to finally solve the puzzle of Osama bin Laden’s whereabouts. But they do come with different expectations attached. Intelligence puzzles are not like jig-saw puzzles in that we may not be very sure we have the right answer – the raid on bin Laden was launched, participants in the decision said, with odds that bin Laden actually was in the compound no better than six in ten. But the fact that there is in principle *an answer* provides some concreteness to what is expected of intelligence.

That is especially so at the more tactical level of intelligence. In the simplest case, targeting (or producing, in wonderful Pentagonese, “desired mean points of impact,” DMPs, pronounced “dimpies”), the enemy unit either is or isn’t where intelligence says it is. And the intelligence will quickly be self-validating as the fighter pilot or drone targeter discovers whether the enemy unit is in fact there. The raid on bin Laden’s compound reflected the solution to a much more complicated puzzle, one that was a nice example of the various forms of collection and analysis working together. But in that case too it would have been immediately apparent to the raiders if bin Laden hadn’t been there.

Another puzzle, whether Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in 2002, drives home the point that because intelligence is a service industry, what policy officials expect from it shapes its work. In the WMD case, neither the U.S. investigating panel nor the British Butler report found evidence that political leaders had directly pressured intelligence agencies to come to a particular conclusion. Yet it is also fair to report that some intelligence analysts on both sides of the Atlantic did feel they were under pressure to produce the “right” answer – that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

The interaction of intelligence and policy shaped the results in several other ways. Policy officials, particularly on the American side, when presented with a range of assessments by different agencies, cherry picked their favorites (and sometimes grew their own cherries by giving credibility to information sources the intelligence services had discredited). As elsewhere in life, how the question was asked went a long way toward determining the answer. In this case, the question became simply “Does Saddam have WMD?” Intelligence analysis did broaden the question, but issues of how much threat, to whom and over what time frame got lost in the “does he?” debate. Moreover, U.S. intelligence was asked over and over about links between Iraq and al Qaeda. It stuck to its analytic guns – the link was tenuous at best – but the repeated questions served both to elevate the debate over the issue and to contribute to intelligence’s relative lack of attention to other questions.

In the end, however, the most significant part of the WMD story was what intelligence and policy shared – a deeply held mindset that Saddam *must* have WMD. That mindset included outsiders like me who opposed going to war, as well as other European intelligence services whose governments were not going to participate in any war. For intelligence, the mindset was compounded by history, for the previous time around, in the early 1990s, U.S. intelligence had underestimated Iraqi WMD; it was not

going to make *that* mistake again. In the end, if most people believe one thing, arguing for another is hard. There is little pressure to rethink the issue, and the few dissenters in intelligence are lost in the wilderness.

What should have been expected from intelligence in this case was a section in the assessments asking what was the best case that could be made that Iraq did *not* have WMD. That would not have made the slightest bit of difference in the rush to war, given the power of the prevailing mindset, but it would at least offered intelligence agencies some protection from later criticism – fair enough – that they had not done their job.

What policy officials expect from intelligence also shapes how intelligence is organized and what kind of people it hires. On the American side of the Atlantic, the crown jewel of intelligence products is the President's Daily Brief (PDB), perhaps the most expensive publication per copy since Gutenberg. Often caricatured as "CNN plus secrets," much of it is factoids from recent collection by a spy or satellite image or intercepted signal, plus commentary. On the British side of the ocean, there is less of a flood of current intelligence, and the assessments of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee are, in my experience, often thoughtful. But on both sides of the ocean, the tyranny of the immediate is apparent. As one U.S. analyst put it to me: "We used to do analysis; now we do reporting."

The focus on the immediate, combined with the way intelligence agencies are organized, may have played some role in the failure to understand the contagion effects in the "Arab spring" of recent months. In the United States, especially, where analytic cadres are large, analysts have very specific assignments. The Egypt analysts are tightly focused on Egypt, perhaps even on particular aspects of Egypt. They would not been looking at ways events in Tunisia might affect Egypt. To be fair, the popular media probably overstated the contagion effect of events from one Arab country to the next, but that there was *some* such effect seems apparent in retrospect. Worse, my bet is that if asked whether events in Tunisia might affect Egypt, even slightly, those Egypt analysts would have said "no" with more or less disdain.

In the end, what is expected of intelligence also shapes what capabilities it builds – and hires. At the tactical level, teams of young analysts from the big U.S. collection agencies (the National Security Agency for signals intelligence or SIGINT and the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency for imagery, or IMINT), organized into "geocells" have become adept at combining SIGINT and imagery, and adding what has been learned from informants in the battle zones, in order to identify events of interests, and ultimately provide those DIMPIs.

The demand for those DIMPIs is plain enough, and the PDB's unusually collected secrets are beguiling if not always very helpful. The demand from policy officials for more strategic, and perhaps longer-term, assessments is less clear. When asked, officials say they would like them: how could they answer otherwise? But in practice too often the response is: "That looks interesting. I'll read it when there is time." And there never is time. When I was at the National Intelligence Council (NIC) overseeing NIEs we had

a good idea. We'd do a short intelligence appraisal of an important foreign policy issue, and the State Department's policy planners would add a policy paper. We'd then convene the deputies – the number twos in the various foreign policy agencies – over an informal lunch. The conversation would begin with the outcome the United States sought a decade out, then peel back to current policy. We got such a session on the deputies' calendar exactly once.

Lacking demand, it is not at all clear that intelligence agencies either hire or train people who could do good strategic analysis – that is, analysis that locates choices in a wider context of other issues and perhaps a longer time stream. Most analysts are trained to look for measurable evidence and struggle with alternative possibilities, but are not always willing to venture beyond the facts and the level of policy description. To be sure, there are differences across agencies. The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, while small, does value deep expertise, letting analysts stay on a particular account for an entire career. By contrast, the analytic arm of the CIA believes good analysts can add value quickly as they move from account to account. As a result, it has more the feel of a newsroom than a university.

At the NIC, I came to think that, for all the technology, strategic analysis was best done in person. Indeed, I came to think that our real products weren't those papers, the NIEs. Rather they were the NIOs, the National Intelligence Officers – experts not papers. We all think we can absorb information more efficiently by reading, but my advice to my policy colleagues was to give intelligence officers some face time. If policymakers ask for a paper, what they get inevitably will be 60 degrees off the target. In 20 minutes, though, the intelligence officers can sharpen the question, and the policy official can calibrate the expertise of the analyst. In that conversation, intelligence analysts can offer advice; they don't need to be as tightly restricted as on paper by the “thou shalt not traffic in policy” injunction. Expectations can be calibrated on both sides of the conversation. And the result might even be better policy.

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