

Achieving Strategic-Level Intelligence

Strategic-level intelligence is absolutely critical to decision-making by Prime Ministers and Presidents the world over. The reasons for this are hardly surprising: issue-management is increasingly complex, and domestic political and international agendas frequently over-lap. International crises often seem to come out of nowhere, at least in part fueled by the 24 hour news-cycle. Hence the new normal for policy makers is a world of abrupt shifts and discontinuities, sudden crises, and unexpected challenges. This is why the value of intelligence is on the rise, - especially strategic intelligence. It offers the promise, at least in the eyes of many politicians, of insight and clarity in a demanding and fast-moving policy context.

What is Strategic-level Intelligence?

Strategic-level intelligence means different things to different parts of the intelligence community, and something else again to policy-makers and politicians. For example, for defence intelligence, particularly within the context of operations, it means privileged information about an opponent's strategic

goals. These might be the goals of an insurgency such as the Taliban or ISIS, or the longer-term goals of a state, such as the objectives of Russia in the Ukraine or the Arctic, China in the South China Sea, or Iran and its nuclear programme. Strategic-level intelligence within the context of international security and defence policy should tell you something not only about military capacity, but about intent, and this is often the most difficult intelligence to obtain.

It is difficult to obtain because it would have to provide insight about the calculations of a Mullah Omar, Vladimir Putin, or Ayatollah Khamenei. Short of that single piece of human intelligence or signals intelligence that might provide real strategic-level intelligence about objectives and intent, defence intelligence in many countries is exploring new avenues to achieve strategic insight. The most promising, at least in theory, is so-called “big data”. You may not know the intentions of a given leader or government, but the aggregation of countless details, the geo-tagging of things, tweets, images, and movements, can answer questions that you did not know you should ask. Moreover, through the integration of the various streams of collection, from imagery to signals, to elint, humint, and so on, the pattern, the design, and the trajectory can tell you a lot about what country X is up to, and what decisions might have already been made, regardless of what the leaders of country X might say in public. So big data can, in principle,

provide a kind of strategic-level intelligence about elite intentions as revealed, say, in complex and often covert military deployments or military procurement.

In a foreign intelligence context, big data might also reveal much about the intentions and activity of “the street”. An understanding of the street in a country in crisis would be strategic intelligence if it tells you something about how certain politically-sensitive issues are trending, the pressures that might be mounting on a given leadership, or an indication as to the potential of the street to transform a given political situation. The technical innovations driving big data could greatly expand the intelligence community’s ability to get a grip on the totality of developments in a given crisis, in order to obtain a holistic view. This holistic view can also contribute to strategic-level intelligence.

Finally, I do not believe that we should restrict our definition of strategic intelligence to collection, or to raw intelligence only. Intelligence assessments often provide strategic insight by synthesizing individual pieces of intelligence, diplomatic reporting, and open source information, including media. A good analyst can bring years of experience and knowledge to bear when looking at what some would regard as disparate facts. A well-informed assessment can provide strategic-level intelligence by showing how individual pieces of information

can add up to high-level insight into an emerging issue. So when considering whether we possess strategic-level intelligence, we should look at how raw intelligence, diplomatic reporting, and open sources can be integrated through assessments to fill the strategic gap.

Political Leaders and the “Promise” of Strategic Intelligence

These are a few initial thoughts about the “supply side”. But we need to look at the demand side as well, that is, how many politicians, and sometimes senior officials, tend to look at strategic-level intelligence from their side of things. In reading press accounts about the occasional unhappiness of leaders with the intelligence they receive, it would appear that, for many politicians, strategic intelligence means that piece of information that reveals the game-plan of the other side, be that an insurgent, terrorist, or foreign government. This kind of intelligence is the legendary “smoking gun”, in that it encapsulates what an individual or a state is really after or planning to do behind the scenes, whether within the context of international negotiations or in the fog of war. But the smoking gun is legendary because it is so elusive.

There is one other kind of intelligence that most politicians would also be prepared to describe as strategic. And this is the intelligence-based forecast. Many leaders regularly ask their

intelligence organizations “why did you not tell me that this was going to happen?” Why did you not tell me that terrorist organization X would make a dash for the capital? Or why did you not tell me that leader Y would grab that piece of territory? If the intelligence community did provide such gifted forecasts, that would be truly strategic-level intelligence.

In fact there is usually no reply to questions as to why intelligence did not predict the future, beyond the mute discomfort of the intelligence official who has the bad luck to be in the room. And that is because the official is probably thinking to him or herself, “it is because we are not in that business”. Intelligence analysts everywhere often tend to regard forecasting as a mug’s game, something akin to armchair quarter-backing. It can be fun to predict the future, but this is almost always speculative and therefore influenced by personal opinion. At least that is the main criticism that forecasts usually attract from intelligence experts.

There is an exception to this rule, which most analysts are prepared to entertain: assessments of long-term trends, which can be identified and factually documented, - often in government publications with names such as “Canada and the world in 2050”. Similarly “acceptable” forecasts tend to focus on events which are fixed in the calendar, like elections, referendums, or high-level meetings. The intelligence

community often predicts that the elections in country X will go this way or that, and these forecasts are regarded as legitimate in part because everyone else is doing them, not least the media. But that is not quite the same as predicting that the barbarians will be at the gate by tea-time on Tuesday. And that therefore we should either lock the gate or vacate the castle. Here, the intelligence community in most countries is reluctant to pronounce.

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So what kind of strategic-level intelligence can we hope to possess? Let me describe what I think is both necessary and achievable:

The “smoking gun” piece of intelligence or information is always a possibility, and can be obtained in a variety of ways, from technical means through to diplomatic reporting. But that will almost always be, in today’s more security-conscious world, a combination of skill and good luck. It cannot be assumed that it will be there when you need it. Strategic level intelligence is only strategic to the extent that it is usable by senior decision-makers, - leaders, ministers, senior officials, or military commanders. The intelligence in question needs to be available, - and in a readable format, relevant, and timely. Intelligence can be strategic, but if it is not in the right place at

the right time, and absorbed by those who make the decisions, it is inconsequential.

What does this mean in practice?

First and foremost, when dealing with the constant stream of daily intelligence, diplomatic reporting, and open source information, a crucial role must be played by assessment. We need to decide what is relevant to the current policy preoccupations of the government of the day, and to place any single piece of information in context, so that the politician or senior official can easily see the strategic significance of that information. It goes without saying, in this day and age, that the intelligence in question needs to be relevant to policy priorities, but also rigorously policy neutral. In other words, intelligence cannot be influenced or “tilted” so as to accommodate the policy interests of the client, i.e., the government of the day. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the ill-founded intelligence estimate of Iraqi WMD, has provided the negative measure for the neutrality of all foreign intelligence since.

But beyond this point about the importance of policy neutrality in the preparation of intelligence assessments, there is another factor that is crucial to intelligence produced for policy-makers, especially politicians. Any sort of current intelligence brief can only be cobbled together by expert analysts that have a strategic grasp of the issues. Expertise, and deep knowledge,

including country and regional specialization, is crucial to the filtering of intelligence for its consumption by policy-makers. The ideal product is current intelligence that is contextualized, - and this has got to be more than simple summaries of information or cut and paste. The greatest disservice to a leader or policy-maker is when the intelligence community provides raw intelligence that (incorrectly) appears to confirm existing policy prejudices, in part because it can be read in a variety of ways by the non-expert. Often intelligence can be bewildering unless you know where it comes from, the nature of the source, and how that intelligence fits into a much larger and more complex puzzle.

So intelligence communities can provide a real service, and real strategic intelligence, by digesting the daily flow of information and integrating the pieces of that puzzle so as to offer insight into what is really going on behind the news stories. But for it to be truly strategic in the eyes of the client, it often has to be “the day of” for it to be relevant. Being right the day after is, well, asking for trouble from our political masters.

Intelligence and Forecasting

In addition to a laser-like focus on current intelligence, being strategic also means going to the other end of the intelligence spectrum, - forecasting. This is controversial, but there is an

expectation at the political level in most Western countries that the intelligence community can do better in alerting them to fast-emerging crises. The answer is in part a matter of better and broader horizon-scanning. However we need to be able to go beyond scanning to more regular forecasting, despite the many reservations by seasoned analysts. This is feasible with the right methodology, where the influence of personal views can be at least minimized. The best methodology is scenario-building, where two or three possible near-term scenarios are constructed based on our current understanding of the facts and the dynamic at play. As events progress, another two or three scenarios can be built based on the new circumstances.

This is a classic iterative process, and requires a fair number of dedicated analysts to do it well. But it has two benefits: first, it educates decision-makers about the range of factors at play, and about possible futures; and second, it can interact with policy-making while maintaining the firewall between intelligence assessment and policy-making. For example, scenario-building can say, “if you take this action, these scenarios might result”, and so on as developments play out. There are bound to be unknowns, and therefore possible scenarios that miss the mark. But this process would integrate the policy and intelligence communities in ways that would be mostly productive and beneficial to both. It is never a bad thing

for analysts to be aware of the policy preoccupations and policy options that are in play. It only increases their relevance.

Meanwhile, the demand for this kind of strategic intelligence will only grow. Fast emerging crises are the new order of the day, and will be a continuing challenge for future governments whether here or elsewhere. Not only are there seemingly more crises, - some crises are impacting others in highly unpredictable ways. Hence only rapid scenario-building will respond to rapid changes in the international context. To do this successfully will require the different parts of the intelligence community to work together in new ways, i.e., cooperation that is more horizontal. But it will also require more collaboration between the intelligence community and policy-makers.

The priority assigned to current intelligence, and to forecasting, set out above, is controversial in some quarters of the intelligence community. But such recommendations flow from the main point, which is that intelligence needs to be relevant and respond to the current and future needs of our policy clients if it can hope to be strategic at all.