

Op-Ed: U.S. Intelligence at a Crossroads

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Despite the killing of Osama bin Laden, this is not and should not be a time for euphoria concerning the state of U.S. intelligence. Even though all praise is due to everyone who participated in the often fruitless, but ultimately rewarding search for bin Laden, the success of this mission should not lead us to complacency about the state of our intelligence system. Earlier this year, *The New York Times* reported that President Obama was unhappy with the lack of adequate intelligence warning about the possibilities of revolution in Tunisia and Egypt. This lack of adequate warning was even more unwarranted, given that President Obama himself had written a five-page memo to his administration in 2010 warning about the restiveness of Arab societies, and Secretary of State Clinton had been making important speeches stressing the same thing. Nevertheless, as the President's reaction indicated, we were quite unprepared, and our policymaking reflected it.

Soon afterwards, Secretary of Defense Gates publicly admitted that we had underestimated the pace and scope of China's military buildup. Since this buildup is a long-term process that is subjected to detailed scrutiny by the Pentagon, State Department, intelligence community, etc., and is the subject of many academic and expert publications, including those by the Army and Navy War Colleges, this announcement is sadly revealing of our defects in intelligence collection and, possibly worse, analysis. China's lack of transparency and its military tradition of extolling deception as a tool of statecraft is not an excuse. Rather, that is the standard operating condition under which we must work in this domain. Since China's defense procurements and much of its defense literature regards a possible contingency against Taiwan and possibly the U.S. as its most likely mission, such a failure has profound consequences for the United States and our allies in Asia, none of which are reassuring.

Then, General James Clapper (Ret.), Director of National Intelligence, testified to Congress that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was a pluralist and secular organization. As the Muslim Brotherhood appears to be the best organized political force in Egypt contending for power in the upcoming elections, a victory by this openly anti-democratic, Islamist, and anti-American (and anti-Israeli) group could have serious negative implications for Middle Eastern security. Failing to grasp this organization's essential nature is a mistake that will likely have serious consequences.

These episodes are by no means unique. Taken in tandem, these seemingly unrelated but actually multiple revelations of intelligence failures underscore the fact that our overall intelligence system does not function as it should. This does not mean that it is a complete failure, the bin Laden case proves otherwise. But the episodes listed above,

along with the fact that we have had several different Directors of National Intelligence in less than a decade who have failed to overcome these problems, suggest continuing, deep-seated, and unresolved issues with the provision of accurate intelligence to policymakers. While intelligence and policy failures relating to the inept or inadequate use of intelligence will always be with us, clearly neither complacency nor euphoria is warranted.

With the new configuration of national security professionals taking shape — CIA Director Leon Panetta moving over to replace Gates, and General David Petraeus moving from Afghanistan to be Director of the CIA — much is being made of the growing connection between the armed forces and the intelligence community, especially in the realm of special operations. But policymakers in the Pentagon and elsewhere need intelligence beyond order of battle or tactical dispositions of enemy targets as in the bin Laden case. They need penetrating and tough-minded analysis that has been subjected not just to official reviews, but to expert questioning, criticism, and inquisition. Indeed, those are the areas cited above where we have most visibly fallen short. But these failures arguably also bespeak a greater societal failure.

During the Cold War, we invested huge resources in the training and education of experts who understood various regions and cultures in a deep and intimate way. Those days are over. These investments are no longer being made and reports of the ignorance of our student body concerning what used to be called civics betray an appalling situation and national failure. American academia, which increasingly takes refuge in the study of transhistorical, transcultural theory, is not turning out specialists in area studies which are denigrated by the new mandarinates devoted to such acultural and ahistorical studies. Since career incentives for area studies are being closed down, students do not enter these fields and this vicious cycle repeats itself. Yet these theories founded largely on the uncritical application of our values to other cultures and societies have generally failed to have successful application. They missed the end of the Cold War, the rise of nationalism and Islamism in the Muslim world directed against the United States, and the changes in the conduct of war. These are large and immensely relevant failings. Confident predictions about the future of warfare based on the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and U.S. supremacy have proven to be chimerical and unwarranted. Not surprisingly, these predictions and the concepts they were based on crashed to earth in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our failure to appreciate the need to understand others within their terms of reference and to grasp the importance of their behavior is evident in the intelligence miscues listed above. This lack of cultural understanding has cost us dearly and will go on doing so unless suitable action to reconstruct an intelligence system and societal structure capable of supporting it is undertaken sooner rather than later. Admittedly, there is no consensus as to how this should be done, or what to do to overcome this failure. But it is clear that we are still on the wrong track and that our success rate is nowhere as good as it should be.

The point of this editorial is, however, not to recommend one or another solution. In dealing with such complex and deeply rooted structures like the intelligence

community, a short essay by definition cannot provide quick answers. But it is imperative to sound the alarm that not only are we failing to understand the world we live in, we are also failing to make sure our successors will understand it better than we do. If anything, there is danger that our insight into foreign peoples will continue to deteriorate, given the now visible crisis in teaching these subjects and the fact that our news media are more attracted to “bread and circuses” than to reporting what is happening in Paris, Cairo, Kabul, etc. With the incoming new leadership at the Pentagon and at the CIA there is yet another opportunity for undertaking a serious and long-term effort to provide current and future policymakers with the best and most timely intelligence and analysis. While failure is always inherent in the intelligence business, we must make every effort to reduce its incidence by minimizing the scope of our misunderstanding of the world. It is already clear that in contemporary war and politics we are being surprised all too often. We tragically learned on 9/11 that what we don’t know can hurt us a great deal.

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