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The Future of Strategic Early Warning

*Tom Quiggin and Kumar Ramakrishna**

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BY definition, strategic warning intelligence must be able to provide anticipatory assessments of future problems in order to avoid strategic surprise. Senior leaders must be well enough informed so that no one particular event, however catastrophic, does not overwhelm them and cripple their reactions. This is an increasingly difficult task which is getting more problematic as the complexity of the international environment grows.

Good strategic early warning intelligence is also the key to a number of non-traditional areas of interest as well such as transport security, social resilience, supply chain management, criminal and health issues. Without anticipatory knowledge, all of these areas of policy interest are subject to disruption and shock.

Requirements for good strategic early warning

What are the requirements for good strategic early warning in the future? Perhaps the most critical requirement is to realize that intelligence is a much different function from the rest of government and it must be allowed to function as such. A Monday-to-Friday approach is not sufficient for strategic level analysts. Intelligence personnel must be deeply motivated and highly involved in their work. Their functions in their work must closely mirror their education and personnel interests. No degree of application of methods and process will suffice if the key personnel involved do not have the necessary backgrounds and interests.

Strategic early warning cannot be reduced to a process like much of the rest of government. It is both dangerous and naïve to think that a machine or a bureaucratic organizational process will somehow produce a quality of intelligence that is greater than the quality of its producers. Current bureaucratic approaches to government management frequently involve the concept of breaking down a required function into a number of smaller tasks that can be carried out in a specialized manner by staff who have a minimal degree of training and responsibility. This sort of Fordist approach cannot work where broader generalist skills are required and longer term perspectives are necessary. Specialists -- those with precise, narrowly defined tasks -- are not generally capable of competently integrating scattered and seemingly unrelated bits of knowledge from a large number of different domains of interest. Without this all-important intelligence integration process, the strategic early warning system will not work.

The quality of strategic early warning work also cannot be subjected to blunt quantitative measures such as numbers of reports, milestones or even so-called “key performance

indicators”. The strategic early warning community must have its overall impact measured by one criterion: the extent to which its assessments actually add informational and analytical value to the national decision-making process. This requires a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, judgment by policy elites. The strategic intelligence community must thus be granted the authority and autonomy to best carry out its responsibilities free from artificially-imposed impediments created by the clumsy application of unresponsive bureaucratic norms.

Valuing the Strategic Early Warning analyst

In essence, if policymakers are serious about developing an effective strategic early warning capacity, much more than seeking out and relying on technological solutions, effective human resource development is crucial. This means hiring promising individuals and being prepared to develop and train them over a period of years. It takes five or seven years of initial training to produce a doctor or veterinarian, plus some years of experience after that. Arguably, given the increasingly complex security environment, the role of the strategic early warning analyst is at least as important as that of the veterinarian, so why not require the same level of training for this individual?

More than that, the career paths of strategic intelligence analysts must be designed with the logic of continuity of trained, motivated expertise in mind. Endless rotations of analysts in and out of positions to ensure “smooth” manpower throughput in line with a Master Personnel Plan all too often results in creating amongst officers a short-term, risk-averse mentality that may be detrimental to the effectiveness of the overall strategic analysis process. In addition, analysts must feel assured that they can speak the truth without fear of adverse consequences. Being an intelligence analyst often means being the bearer of bad news or presenting views that run contrary to the intentions and views of powerful significant others. Shooting the messenger is an unfortunate reality in highly sclerotic, bureaucratized systems. If early warning analysts learn the hard way that unpopular assessments would land them in hot soup, it is unlikely in the extreme that they will develop either the interest or the capability to pick up on the “faint signals” that need to be put forward and understood in the face of change.

Finally, in today’s uncertain, complex security context, strategic early warning analysts cannot afford the luxury of tunnel vision. Analysts increasingly need to move outside of government circles on a regular basis to deal with like-minded individuals in think tanks, industry and other parts of government. It is not outlandish to assert that most expertise and knowledge required for effective strategic early warning analysis now lie outside of government. Extra-governmental expertise therefore needs to be tapped and systematically engaged.

Outlook

The complexity and uncertainty that are the hallmarks of the current international environment appear likely to increase. Strategic early warning intelligence analysts across the globe must now provide effective anticipatory warnings on a range of issues involving transport security, social resilience, supply chain management, crime, health and other issues. In order to achieve this, the community must be able to break free from bureaucratic straight jackets, hire creative thinkers, train them for years, give them sufficient external exposure to global best practices in a range of domains, and then support them in the face of opposition from conservative, hide-bound elements that may linger in policy circles. To do anything less

may well have fateful consequences for governments and nations.

** Tom Quiggin is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning Programme in the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS). Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna is Acting Head of CENS, a constituent unit of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*