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Intelligence: Evolving Limitations and Contributions

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SYNOPSIS

On its own, intelligence is rarely enough and has its limitations. In an increasingly complex security landscape with non-state actors and great power tensions, the importance of learning from the past and understanding the mindset of 'the other side' is key.

COMMENTARY

IN AN age of technology and surveillance, intelligence has gained increasing significance in relation to understanding both state and non-state actors. History points to the central role intelligence has in ensuring national security. In World War Two, the successful interception of enemy intelligence and communications led to extensive insight into enemy dispositions and intentions.

During the Cold War, intelligence reports detailing the background behind Soviet anxieties enabled leadership among the Allied powers to diffuse tensions by reaching across the Iron Curtain. Within a few hours of 9/11, intelligence services pinpointed Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda as responsible for the attack. While regarded as successes, these hallmarks of intelligence concurrently highlight its limitations.

Four Limitations

First, the predilection of human error, biases and preconceptions poses a challenge to intelligence with regard to understanding the mindsets of organisations and leaders.

The costs of this limitation were particularly salient during the Cold War. While the United States and Soviet Union had an understanding of the other on a technical level,

there was a gap when it came to political thought machinations. This lack of mutual understanding contributed to the security dilemma. For instance, command and control exercises such as 'Able Archer' in 1983 heightened anxieties within the Soviet Leadership over a nuclear strike on the part of US/ NATO.

The importance of overcoming this limitation prevails today. Great Power tensions are now present in the form of Russian anxieties, the rise of a more assertive China and uncertainty about US policy. This dynamic demonstrates the complexity of international relations and may foreshadow the revival of a security dilemma reminiscent of the past, reinforcing the need for both technical and human intelligence.

Second, the unpredictability of Great Power leaderships is compounded by the role of non-state actors today, further dulling the ability of intelligence to anticipate new threats.

Danger of Limited Intelligence

This limitation was clear when intelligence services were unable to prevent the 9/11 attacks. While there was some knowledge of the attack beforehand, intelligence services were still taken by surprise as there was little understanding of Al-Qaeda and its leadership.

Intelligence services encounter the similar difficulties today with a growing awareness that the security landscape is populated by new actors. In particular, self-radicalised actors pose a challenge to the intelligence community as they are harder to disrupt and intercept. A key example would be the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack who acted alone.

Third, swift changes in the security landscape entail a steep learning curve and demand an ability and willingness to adapt one's understanding of security threats, among leaders of intelligence services.

As previous examples show, the Cold War climate evolved into a security landscape dominated by terrorism and non-state actors. This turn diverged sharply from dealing with the threats of the Cold War. In the early 2000s, the intelligence community had to come to terms with the reality of a post 9/11 world.

Need for Transparency

The 2005 London Attacks further exemplified changing threats to a new environment with blurring of domestic and foreign threats. The intelligence service had to adjust to the idea that citizens born in the UK could be radicalised and become suicide bombers.

Fourth, the higher profile of the intelligence services suggests a difficulty in maintaining a balance between secrecy and public trust. The proposition of being under constant surveillance and living in a "goldfish bowl" is unattractive, and not in step with the ideals of liberal democracy. The difficulty and complexity that often confounds the state lies in finding a balance between personal freedoms and the need to protect the security of citizens.

Four Contributions

There are however key ways in which limitations can be addressed and positively harnessed.

First, while Great Power relations present a precarious landscape of fraying relations and complex leadership, intelligence services have an important role to play through discreet and informal diplomacy, as well as the sharing of information.

Channels of communication should remain open between intelligence services, with dialogue taking place at as many levels as possible. There must be mutual recognition that disconnecting communications during a period of difficult relations is often counter-productive and must be avoided.

The sharing of knowledge also enhances intelligence surrounding otherwise elusive personalities and threats. Following 9/11, there was a deliberate shift towards a cultural mantra of “dare to share” in response to the realisation that information had been limited to various silos. The attack may have been thwarted had there been a broader and deeper understanding of the threat posed by Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

Second, the unpredictability of new threats means that intelligence services are even more central to enhancing the anticipation of unforeseen security challenges, as well as understanding the mindsets of new organisations and leaderships.

Non-State Actors

In the particular context of non-state actors, studies and analyses have shown quite convincingly that a majority of terror attacks in Europe over the last five to six years have come from individuals who are not part of terror organisations. They are generally motivated by personal factors and may occasionally be ideologically inspired from extremist groups. They very often have criminal records, personal problems and serious social frustrations.

While progress is apparent in understanding the mindset and motivations of new actors, there continues to be an urgent need to comprehend why individuals, isolated and often depressed, lean on hateful propaganda and act in violent ways to find meaning and call attention to themselves. Platforms such as social media may also enable intelligence services better to identify signs and trends among individuals at risk.

Third, leadership among the intelligence services should always be ready with an immediate response to crises. While facing a period of uncertainty, leaders have to be able to adapt, adopt new strategies and learn new skills. It is critical to have a clear overall strategic direction and purpose for organisations, and to be able to clearly convey this.

Between Protecting and Sharing Information

While surveillance and secrecy are subject to critique among the public, including the media, the balance lies in being able to discern between information that needs to be

protected and information that can be shared with the public. Essential to finding this balance is the presence of an independent judiciary, untethered to the state, to adjudicate and find an acceptable middle ground that both protects and empowers society.

Having said this, there is a need for some surveillance and control in societies to ensure peace and harmony, and to stave off tangible threats. With increased leaks in recent years, there is an acute realisation that there has to be a balance between the traditional “need to know” approach, which focused on severely limiting the sharing of knowledge for the purposes of security, to the “dare to share” approach that emerged after 9/11 among security agencies.

To conclude, while there is indeed a risk that the importance of intelligence can be overstated and exaggerated, it continues to have a significant impact in critical moments of national security. The increasing complexity of the security landscape calls for continued emphases on technical and human intelligence, and balancing the need for secrecy with diplomacy, dialogue and openness.

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