Intelligence, Policy, and the Mandate: A Third Form of Strategic Failure

Neveen S. Abdalla & Philip H.J. Davies

Published online: 11 Aug 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 2126

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

∂ OPEN ACCESS ⬤ Check for updates

Intelligence, Policy, and the Mandate: A Third Form of Strategic Failure

Neveen S. Abdalla ⬤ and Philip H.J. Davies ⬤

Brunel Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK

Introduction: US and them

There is a popular aphorism in the intelligence world that 'there are only intelligence failures and policy successes' (Jervis, 2010, p. 157). It is an observation with telling resonances on many different levels. It captures the sense among intelligence practitioners that in the best of all possible worlds, the ultimate goal of intelligence is to enable the formation of sound and successful policy. The self-interest of the intelligence profession is necessarily subordinate to that of the policy to which it serves as proverbial handmaiden (Pillar, 2011, p. 136). In the worst of all possible worlds, it portrays decision makers – whether politicians or operational commanders in the military – as venal glory-hounds quick to grasp credit from, or shift blame to, the intelligence community. Examples of both can readily be identified within living memory. But what it does most fundamentally is identify and draw a sharp, binary distinction between policy professionals and the intelligence community as two different in-groups within government reflecting two equally sharply divided functions. In fact, this dichotomy is, if not illusory, then substantially exaggerated, and the fuzzy boundaries between the two are inadequately examined and understood. This not primarily because individual career paths may weave across both, like a Robert Gates serving at various points within the Central Intelligence Agency and then in the policy realm of the National Security Council before becoming Director of Central Intelligence. Far more important are moments where the two worlds must work in a collective effort for certain crucial aspects of the intelligence process to operate as intended. The most significant such point is the putative starting point of the so-called 'intelligence cycle' direction.

Direction is almost certainly the least scrutinized aspect of the intelligence process on one hand and the relationship between intelligence production and policy formation on the other. Whole monographs are regularly produced on collection functions and capabilities – the charismatic sharp end of 'spying' –

as well as on assessment and analysis. There is even a substantial journal literature on drafting and communicating intelligence judgments to consumers with titles like 'Words of Estimative Probability' (Kent, 1964), 'To Footnote or Not to Footnote'(Alexander, 1964) (and 'More Against Footnotes') (Allan & David, 2007) and even 'Elegant Writing in the Clandestine Service' (Puderbaugh, 2011). But direction, and its central component of identifying requirements and priorities (R&P), is largely relegated to scattered paragraphs in other works. And even those passing observations are typically confined to how dysfunctional, laborious and even unnecessary requirements and priorities processes appear to the authors.

And yet the consequences of triaging expenditure and scarce collection and analytic capabilities are a recurrent theme in postmortems of intelligence failure. Richard Betts has suggested that R&P lists serve almost as predictors of failure because whatever is at the bottom of the list is most likely to fail (Betts, 2009, p. 109). From Iraq to the Falklands (Franks, 1983), reviews have repeatedly noted that the case they must examine held a low priority in national intelligence R&P. Intelligence capabilities are expensive and comparatively scarce, even for major powers, because the information needs are often on the global scale. Consequently, therefore, directing those capabilities to best effect is actually a vital aspect of the intelligence process rather than an afterthought. And yet direction is rarely systematically addressed in reviews and postmortems. Even more significantly, direction is not something that can be done by the intelligence community in isolation. This is because the information needs they serve are not the information needs of the intelligence community, but those of their consumers. Formulation of requirements and priorities is something that must be – in principle – undertaken conjointly by the policy and intelligence communities conjointly, hand in glove.

Other functions critical to intelligence activity, beyond managing collection assets and analytic work streams, fall out of the requirements and priorities process. This complex of broader mechanisms that hinge upon tasking may be thought of as the intelligence mandate. When the requirements and priorities fail, it impacts direction. When direction fails, the result is a pervasive, comprehensive mandate failure. When the mandate fails, collection and analysis cannot succeed. And yet, direction and mandate failure are almost never acknowledged or diagnosed as such. In part, this is because the consequent failures of collection and analysis may serve to mask deeper dysfunctions. However, it is also the case that most reviews and postmortems are conducted by denizens of a policy community that must necessarily share any culpability with the intelligence profession if there has been a mandate failure. As a result, all too many reform programs may have been conducted on false or at least significantly incomplete premises. And our understanding of the health and performance of intelligence communities in amongst the Western democracies may also be seriously flawed. A thorough understanding of the intelligence

mandate, and of mandate failure, is long overdue. It would, of course, be impossible to review all the different national systems, models and experiences in a single discussion. It is, however, feasible to consider the problem in general terms and identify directions for deeper, case-specific investigations in future work.

Over the decades a great deal of retrospective study and investigation has sought to improve intelligence collection and analysis, or identify and limit the causes of failure. Yet there remains a profound dearth of discussion on direction or requirements. This implies that this stage of the so-called intelligence cycle is perceived to be of less consequence than the other functions, and of greater inconvenience. The requirements process has been described as "the most over-bureaucratized aspect of intelligence management,"(Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy, 1975, appendix U, p.43) and lambasted over the course of decades. The process is over-burdened and underutilized, and as more needs are fed into the system, it becomes less functional. Attempts to reform parts of the process have often led to difficulties in other parts. The implementation of reforms has been selective, and these changes are often enacted or contested amid a melee of agencies contending for primacy, or Cabinet heads pushing political agendas.

Further, in the aftermath of national security failures, inquiries tend to avoid the idea of collective failure. In the UK, Robertson warned in 1988 that it would be a grave error if the focus on public accountability were to obscure the real issue of intelligence requirements and management (Robertson, 1988). This is true in many Western countries, where discussion of systemic success or failure remains palpably absent. However, the requirements process has the potential to be the weakest link in the chain. In the absence of its examination, intelligence production cannot be optimized, and the characteristics of mandate failure will continue to be misdiagnosed. So why does the R&P consistently go unmentioned?

Historically, there has been a tendency to conduct postmortem investigations of intelligence and policy community actions in isolation, rather than to examine systemic failures.[1] This presupposes a division of responsibility between the two communities and creates an inherent compartmentalization of blame. This construct stems from a historically ingrained notion that a 'firewall' divides the intelligence and policy communities, separating the actions taken within each institution. Although the firewall is an illusion, this perception has often impacted the scope of port-mortem examinations. Government-commissioned inquiries concentrate unevenly on the intelligence community, rationing investigation at the policy level and failing altogether to employ scrutiny at a joint or systemic level. A repeated cycle of narrow investigations results in the force-fitting of failure into one community

---

[1]·Notably, failure, by nature of its consequences, tends to be scrutinized more intensively and publicly than success.

or the other, foregoing acknowledgment of collaborative failure that results from the mechanism that inextricably binds the two communities. The failure to address intelligence mandates systematically and consistently in the public scrutiny and oversight of intelligence represents a serious lacunae in intelligence governance, and creates a serious likelihood that any reforms may be made on both an incomplete picture of what needs to be reformed and, consequently, on false premises (Davies, 2012, p. 146).

From wish lists to work plans: the requirements process

It is perhaps easiest to start with a simple premise: all nations are concerned with protecting their national interests and security. In order to monitor areas of potential threat, a nation must first identify areas of risk which require more scrutiny. Therefore, all nations have a list of intelligence needs. For global stakeholder such as the US, the list can be exhaustive. In order to streamline and manage these needs, a process is set in place to determine which of those needs will be met, and how. This process is referred to as the requirements and priorities process.

The process begins with consultations between the intelligence community's coordinating body and policy officials. During these consultations, policy officials, as the consumers of information, relay their needs to intelligence producers. Over the course of these discussions, a comprehensive list of intelligence needs is amassed. At this stage, it is important for both policy and intelligence representatives to develop a clear understanding of the needs they wish to address. For instance, it is not enough to simply identify Russia as a priority; considerations on Russia are likely to include specific aspects of political, military, and cyber activity. In turn, each of these is likely to require its own category and levels of prioritization. Therefore, it is critical that intelligence needs are specific.

After consultations are completed, the result is an extensive 'information wish list' – an inventory of national intelligence needs (Tenet, 2000, p. 4). This aggregated list is submitted to a coordinating body within the intelligence community, where it is filtered for redundant or unfeasible requests. The remaining requests are delivered to the lead intelligence community official, who adjusts the requests and delivers recommendations to the relevant Cabinet-level officials (US Congress, 2001) who fine-tune and finalize the list. Once agreed, the finalized list of intelligence needs are formalized into intelligence requirements (IRs).[2] These IRs are then ranked according to their significance to national security and foreign policy. In other words, each intelligence requirement is associated with a level of priority. This is not,

---

[2] According to the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, intelligence requirements are defined as "Any subject, general or specific, upon which there is a need for the collection of information, or the production of intelligence." United States. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Publication 2–0: Joint Intelligence. 2013. I-8.

however, the end of the direction process. Once captured, requirements and priorities set the stage for the formulation and management of a range of additional mechanisms which constitute what might best be thought of as the intelligence *mandate.*

Go thou: tasking as mandate

R&P underpins whole suite of processes essential to the management and execution of intelligence activities on which the more visible collection, assessment, and production processes subsequently depend. Collectively, these constitute the marching orders, the mandate, for intelligence. Overall, the mandate can be thought of as consisting in:

(1) *Requirements and Priorities*: Identifying and rank-ordering information needs and targets of collection and assessment by comparatively scarce systems, capabilities, and personnel provides what might be considered the axioms for the other three mandate-level functions;
(2) *Budgets and Resourcing*: In the first instance this refers to financial resources in the form of budgets and authorized spending programs, but may also refer to resources 'in kind' such as personnel, physical facilities or operational assets;
(3) *Joint and Interagency Cooperation*: interagency and joint service cooperation requires both forthcoming willingness on the part of cooperating organizations as peers, and motivation and facilitation by higher supervisory authorities;
(4) *Collection Operations Authorizations*: This applies particularly but not exclusively to collection systems, capabilities and assets, especially those which entail intrusive powers or a significant political risk or 'flap potential' should they be exposed;

The other three mandate components provide the framework for collection and finished intelligence production. R&P drives the shape they take, and they in turn determine how effectively the rest of the process occurs.

Resourcing

The outcome of rank ordering defines the areas of intelligence focus and determines how several billions of dollars in programming will be spent on associated intelligence collection and analysis. Resources are the drivers of priorities (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 44), and therefore comprise the second mandate-level function. During the budgeting process, intelligence requirements that are given the highest priority receive the greatest share of the budget. As the priority level decreases, the associated budget also decreases. In this

manner, the budget serves as an indicator of what the government considers critical, important, or worthy of observation (Warner, 2007, p. 20).

Once budgets are allocated to one task, they cannot be allocated to another (Johnson, 2012, p. 40). Consequently they are, in the economic sense of the term, scarce.[3] As such, the requirements and their associated intelligence budget provides a list of explicit instructions and implicit restrictions. This sends a message to the intelligence community of where to expend its resources and capabilities, and to what extent. The allocation of resources to a task serves as the "most effective and inescapable form of control for any government agency" (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 44). Across the intelligence community, national requirements are meant to shape departmental and agency and departmental requirements.

Joint/interagency cooperation

After intelligence requirements are established, careful consideration is given to the capabilities of each intelligence community department and agency. In many cases, meeting intelligence requirements necessitates input from multiple agencies with specialized collection channels in order to order to draw from strategic, operational, or tactical concentrations. Each organization has its own range of capabilities and, in the case of departmentally controlled rather than national organizations, its own suite of departmental taskings to fulfil. This creates the problems of encouraging or even compelling collaboration between multiple agencies or departments. A national R&P document provides much of that required authority as the supporting structures for each task are defined, including the determination of the lead and cooperating national agencies (United States Defense Technical Information Center, 2011). Guidelines derived from the R&P are communicated across the intelligence community in order to align intelligence activities with the formalized national intelligence requirements (Clapper, 2015). Interagency cooperation allows each department to address the IR within their specialized arena, while sharing information and cooperating with their counterparts to address collection and analysis objectives.

Operational clearances

Once the IRs have been distributed across the intelligence community, the departments and agencies are also provided the authorizations necessary to conduct activities related to the requirement (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 77). Operational authorizations, the fourth mandate-level component, define the

---

[3.]The notion of scarcity in economics is not, of course, that of inadequacy but the idea that once a finite, depletable resource has been applied to one end it cannot be applied to another as well.

extent and limitations of intelligence activity, whether offensive or defensive. Sufficient authorization is given to ensure that the agencies can appropriately address the IR. Low-risk activities, such as the collection of open-source information, require a low level of authorization, whereas activities that carry a greater amount of risk, including actions that could detrimentally impact foreign policy, require higher levels of authorization. For instance, the US Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 2008 (FISA) requires that the intelligence community provide justification for the electronic and physical surveillance of targets located outside of the United States.[4] By much the same token, there was a presidential unwillingness to approve U2 overflights of Cuba after the 1961 shoot-down of Francis Gary Powers over the USSR. This reticence over minimally intrusive high-altitude overflights not only faded but was followed by readily forthcoming approval of far more intrusive and dangerous low-level photoreconnaissance missions as the urgency of the October Crisis changed the relative priority of Soviet activities on that island (Holland, 2005).

Mandates can or at least should constitute an essential aspect of the governance and oversight of intelligence. In addition to its other functions, the requirements and priorities document also provides the basis for audit trail for evaluating a range of criteria, such as value for money, functional effectiveness, and compliance. In this way, the mechanism introduces a system of controls and monitoring to ensure that no actions or expenditures related to an operation occurs without prior notification or approval. In the United States, for example, the Executive branch, Congressional committees, and other organizations monitor intelligence community activities to ensure that "reasonable and lawful means" are used to obtain reliable intelligence (Obama, 2008). Justifying resources expended against explicit requirements and priorities combined with scrupulous processes of authorization and compliance have been described as the 'triad of real control' for the intelligence community (Davies, 2010; Glees, Davies, & Morrison, 2006). Indeed, so significant is fiscal control in intelligence that one British Cabinet Office report described the national intelligence budget as the single most important instrument in the governance of the intelligence services (Cabinet Office, 2009).

In a broader context, the requirements and priorities process works in a similar manner to many other governmental needs. For example, comparable processes exist between policymakers and other agencies to achieve aims in food safety, education, or economic stability. Yet this process tends to be perceived differently in the context of the intelligence and policy communities, perhaps in no small part due to its inherent secrecy. The intelligence requirements and priorities process relates directly to national security, therefore by

---

[4]Interestingly, there are no current regulations in place to address overhead surveillance. United States Congress. US Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 2008. 110–261, 110 Congress, U.S. Government Printing Office. (2008) (enacted).

necessity, its methods and output often remain classified for decades. The public is generally aware of the nation's highest national security priorities – they are often a part of public discourse – but the specific vectors of intelligence targeting remain a closely guarded secret.

Intelligence consumers are notoriously short-sighted. Political policy-makers tend to focus on a 7–day news cycle or a four year electoral cycle, civil servants focus on the next annual spending round or longer term comprehensive spending review. But highest-ranking priorities tend to reflect long-term challenges despite what Russ Travers has described as 'the whipsaw' of urgent requirements and priorities. The large-scale spending and development programs tend, as a result, to remain relatively stable over the medium to long term of around 5 to 10 years. While this was most true of the Cold War deadlock, it is worth keeping in mind that the initial surprise and emergency of 9/11 gave rise to a struggle with transnational jihadist terrorism that dominated intelligence operations and planning for more than a decade. As a result, the budgets associated with intelligence priorities are often established several years in advance; in the US, as many as eight fiscal-year budgets are in use or being developed at any point in a given year (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 39). In order to prepare a long-term outlook despite the tyrannies of urgent and current intelligence, intelligence and policy communities both find they must collaborate to determine future intelligence needs based on their best guess of the issues that will remain relevant (Grabo & Goldman, 2002, p. 13). As a result, issues of a current yet fleeting urgency are unlikely to appear in long-term budget planning.

A week, as the saying goes, is a long time in politics. And so intelligence mandates calibrated in terms of years must somehow deal with the new and unexpected. There are occasions when new issues emerge that immediately rise to the tops of the national security agenda. To accommodate for this, the R&P process provides contingencies for unexpected events that arise in low-priority areas. In times of crisis, an issue may become an ad-hoc priority, causing the urgent issue to be rapidly 'shifted' to a higher position. This *mandate shift* triggers a temporary realignment of priorities, providing necessary mandate-level functions, but for a shorter length of time. Provisions for, and a viable mechanism to manage, mandate shifts must, therefore, be accommodated somehow.

When a crisis requires a mandate shift, the smooth function of the process (guided by an authoritative intelligence lead) becomes critical. The goal is to allow the arbitration and rapid escalation of an urgent priority and sanctions the distribution and application of mandate-level functions. In short, this shift provides new, temporary direction for the intelligence community. A mandate shift does not allow ad-hoc priorities to supersede other priorities, but to stand alongside them. If the issue appears to have long-term ramifications, it will be subject to scrutiny and if necessary, formalized into an intelligence priority

over the course of subsequent consultations as the requirements and priorities document are reviewed.

The mandate can only function effectively under a very specific set of conditions. For example, for the intelligence process to remain relevant and effective, policymakers engage with R&P effectively and in an on-going fashion. By the same token, the agencies to adhere to the strategy and respond accordingly. Departmental agencies and policy officials must acknowledge or at least be willing to accommodate the authority of national requirements and priorities vis a vis their own, departmental requirements and activities. Operational clearances mechanisms need to proceed in a timely and realistic manner on the one hand, while operational agencies seeking clearance need to be both scrupulous and forward-leaning in seeking and securing clearance. And the resources provided to intelligence must be necessary, sufficient, and timely. In reality, however, any and all of these mechanisms supporting the mandate can and do go wrong. Consequently, the overall intelligence effort goes awry with them. All of this hinges, therefore, on a collective effort and responsibility shared between policy and intelligence.

Spying out the wrong land: how mandates fail

Even when stakeholders in the intelligence and policy community are diligent, there is still the potential for error within the requirements and priorities process. In theory, the process appears streamlined, but in practical application it has been mired with problems. Globally, governments and intelligence communities struggle with their versions of the R&P process to varying degrees, at every stage in the process.[5] As a result, there are several issues that can occur, and each of these can have lasting detrimental impacts. At the initial stages of the R&P process, failures in the development of the intelligence requirements can take many forms.

As mentioned, to ensure that the list of intelligence requirements is maintained, the process requires the active and consistent engagement of intelligence consumers and producers. In this manner, the communities can signal emerging concerns and eliminate issues that are no longer relevant. When consultations are conducted regularly, the aggregated list is refreshed to include emerging concerns, eliminate issues that are no longer relevant, and ensure that the full scope of intelligence needs is suitably represented. Often, this engagement is lacking. Rather than providing a list of needs, some consumers expect intelligence producers to be aware of what they want, and to alert them to rising concerns in their area of focus (Hulnick, 2006, p. 959).

[5.]For example, the Canadian Intelligence system has struggled with coordination efforts. See: Wark, Wesley. "The Intelligence-Law Enforcement Nexus" in Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight, Research Studies Volume 1: Threat Assessment and RSCMP-CSIS Cooperation (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services, 2010), pp. 147–183

This leaves middle managers in the intelligence community to essentially guess which items may be considered useful. A wrong guess can lead to accusations that the intelligence community provides irrelevant information, but more importantly, it poses an accountability problem to both communities. As an adjunct to policy, the intelligence community requires input from consumers. If intelligence managers determine what should be considered important, it is tantamount to making policy recommendations.

In the instances when consumers do engage, a different type of obstacle can emerge – intelligence requests are rarely precise. Often, they are too vague, too specific, or otherwise unrealistic. This may be the result of policymakers either not knowing what they need, or lacking understanding of intelligence capabilities and its limitations. As a result, consumers sometimes have difficulty communicating their needs (Johnson, 1989, p. 81). Some consumers articulate needs that are too specific or contain too many sub-requirements. An overload of specificity may restrict the flexibility of intelligence collection and analysis and weaken the output. Without clarification, producers must interpret the request to fit intelligence capabilities, while also managing expectations regarding the limitations of intelligence.

In addition to concerns about consumer input, the actual list of intelligence needs can still be quite daunting, and the responsibility to filter and prioritize the needs is often made more difficult by continuous political pressure to prioritize an increasing number of needs. Information on the latest Russian tank, for example, quickly breaks into a proliferation of subordinate requirements. Beyond such obvious matters such as armor, firepower, crew, and mobility one must specify additional questions such as its communications outfit, sensors, operational endurance, nuclear/biological/chemical protection, reliability and time between repairs, logistics requirements and facilities, supply chains for its components and so forth. It is not hard to imagine a similar propagation of taskings for a terrorist group, political leadership cadre or alliance. Not without reason was the National Security Agency's R&P list in the 1950s once compared in heft and detail with the Washington DC telephone directory (Overshine & Foley, 1955). As such, the amassing of intelligence needs is formidable, and the ranking of priorities is precarious. Too many intelligence requirements can cause errors in prioritization and result in a strain on the intelligence community's finite resources.

Even when all of these hurdles are overcome, there is the risk of simply putting getting the mandate wrong. This can include assigning a requirement with the wrong level of priority, overlooking an important need, or other "innocent" errors that arise when a massive task is undertaken.

The explanations above indicate the fragility of the requirements and priorities process, and the risks involved in establishing intelligence requirements. Yet this is not the end of the minefield. Beyond the collection and formalization of requirements, failures can emerge in during the allocation of

the remaining mandate-level functions. Mandate-level functions are not unlike cogs in a watch; to operate effectively they must move in lockstep with the other functions in order to mobilize an intelligence directive. If a cog is misaligned, the process may not operate effectively. If any one component of the mandate is dysfunctional it can disrupt all of the other elements of the higher direction of intelligence.

Requirements and priorities

Unlike other types of failure, weaknesses in the requirements and priorities process may take a longer time to manifest. An illustration of such failure can be found in the US intelligence community at the turn of the 21st century. In the US during the Cold War, the vast majority of top-level intelligence requirements were concentrated on the Soviet Union and its satellite nations. The collapse of the Soviet state resulted in the evaporation of many priorities of previous decades. Bill Clinton, the first fully post-Cold War president, leveraged the change in priorities to redefine American foreign policy strategy and conduct an overhaul of the requirements and priorities mechanism. He implemented Presidential Decision Directive 35, (White House, 1995) which caused two major changes to the R&P structure. First, under this directive, priorities were placed in tiers of importance ranked 0 through 4. Tier 0 represented the most urgent and immediate concerns (usually military operations), followed by Tiers 1 and 1A, which respectively addressed consistently hostile nations, and transnational issues impacting US security.[6] Second, modifications to priorities required presidential authorization, and the directive called for regular reviews, particularly of the highest intelligence priorities.[7] However, shortly after its implementation in 1994, Clinton became embroiled in personal and domestic concerns, and review of priorities fell to the wayside throughout the remainder of his presidency.

The changes were intended to ensure a hands-on approach by the Clinton administration, however by 1996, a staff study by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence found that PDD-35 had worsened the requirements problem. The unequal distribution of priorities meant that lower tier requirements suffered greatly, and items at Tier 0, meant for short-term crises, became filled with protracted conflicts. As a result, long-term estimates suffered (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence [HPSCI], 1996).

[6.]Nations at Tier 1 were also covered through a "Hard Targets process" to ensure that coverage gaps in intelligence were identified and addressed. See: House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. "IC21: The Intelligence Community in the 21st Century." Staff Study. 104th Congress, 2nd Session. (Government Printing Office, 1996).

[7.]"An Interagency Working Group (IWG) will meet at least quarterly to identify and make recommendations regarding foreign policy issues or crisis situations which should be afforded Tier 0 status. The IWG will also review on an annual basis Tiers I A and I B and recommend changes as appropriate to the National Security Advisor." See: United States. National Security Agency. The Communicator: NSA's Employee Publication. 40th ed. Vol. III. Washington, DC (1995).

Further, without regular presidential review, the intelligence community could not remove or modify priorities as their significance changed. This left dead issues among the list of priorities, kept emerging issues at lower tiers, and caused a detrimental impact on other requirements, eventually breaking down the priority system (HPSCI, 1996). As a result, for 6 years the USIC was in "a procedural straitjacket from which it could not escape" (Davies, 2012, p. 145). In 2000, the National Commission for the review of the National Reconnaissance Office warned that not only was the R&P process failing, but there was no mechanism to notify policymakers of the problems caused by assigning military force protection to Tier 0 (National Commission for the Review of the National Reconnaissance Office, 2000, p. 51).

Despite the cautions, no changes were made to PDD 35 through the remainder of the Clinton administration. By the time George W. Bush took office in 2001, the National Security Agency had to contend with 1,500 formal requirements and 20,000 "essential elements of information" required by policymakers (Zegart, 2009, p. 97). Due to the lack of regular reviews under PDD 35, on 10 September 2001, Afghanistan was considered a Tier 3 issue, and the US military had not ordered a new map of the nation for 4 years (Zegart, 2009, p. 97). A day later, Afghanistan would become the most significant country in the world. Subsequent findings by the 9/11 Commission would characterize the tragedy of September 11, 2001 as an intelligence failure, in particular, a failure of imagination" (9/11 Commission, 2004, exsum).

This event dramatically underscores the scope and long-term impact that can exist in the absence of an optimized requirements and priorities process. It also demonstrates the tendency for accusation to veer toward the symptoms rather than the root cause of the issue. At first glance, it may be easy to argue that the failures surrounding the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York were the fault of one community in isolation of the other. But despite the common tendency to compartmentalize failure, weaknesses stemming from the R&P cannot be classed as strictly the responsibility of the intelligence or policy community. Rather, they are collaborative failures. The integration of intelligence and policy in the process means there is a collective responsibility for malfunctions in the R&P.

Budgets and resources

Budgeting often faces its share of complications. As the list of IRs expands though greater need (or inevitable mission creep), the expansion is rarely balanced by an increase in resources or cuts to other requirements. Rather, existing resources are stretched to cover the existing priorities. When the budget is stretched thin by a large number of IRs, it can cause issues of high priority to receive fewer resources than required, (Betts, 2009, p. 109) and

leaves areas of lower priority with less funding. This increases the risk of collection gaps or other errors that could result in early warning failure.

In times of war or crisis, the needs of national defense are by necessity given higher priority. This can skew requirements toward defense-based prioritization and strain the funding remaining for non-combative priorities. The drive to obtain a portion of the remaining funding can sometimes create competition among agencies who desire more resources. This can lead to a secondary concern: once funding is released to address national intelligence requirements, senior managers within intelligence organizations may assess that certain departmental issues take precedence over national issues. In these instances, they may reprogram expenditure away from national priorities (Davies, 2012, p. 31).

Interagency cooperation

Interagency cooperation can be hampered by several things, including conflicting perspectives on intelligence requirements, acrimony among top-level officials, or competitions for budget and resources. The failure to work with other departments or agencies can lead to the stovepiping of information, and result in disjointed, uninformative intelligence. Famously, the FBI and the CIA have a well-documented, decades-long schism that has impacted collaboration on domestic and international security (Riebling, 2010).

Suppression of authorization

There are instances when leading policy officials may artificially suppress a priority in order to meet a competing foreign policy aims. In these cases, authorizations to conduct intelligence activities can be delayed or withheld. This is best exemplified by the artificially low priority level given to Iran during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter eras. Iranian cooperation was vital to US Cold War efforts against the Soviet Union, therefore successive American administrations acquiesced to the Shah's request to stay removed from Iranian domestic affairs (Pollack, 2004). As a result, the forced low prioritization of Iran hindered receipt of the resources, collaboration, or authorizations necessary to conduct intelligence activities. In the 7 years prior to the 1979 uprising, the US intelligence community had issued warnings and pushed for greater priority of the issue. However, these authorizations were only given 2 months before the expulsion of the Shah, and only after events in Tehran had escalated to a point where they could no longer be ignored (PRC Meeting on Iran, 1978). The delay in these authorizations left the Carter Administration blindsided by the Iranian revolution, and unprepared to deal with Iran's new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

The failure of mandate-level functions perhaps becomes most visible during the escalation of ad-hoc priorities. Dahl has observed that intelligence can only succeed when decision makers are receptive to warning (Dahl, 2013, p. 20); this can prove difficult in cases where low priority issues are concerned. Politicians may be predisposed to a "deaf captain syndrome," a cognitive bias that causes them to dismiss information that conflicts with their world view (Davies & Glees, 2004). The absence of conviction amongst policymakers can result in restrictions or delays of priority escalation. This can slow the realignment of mandate-level functions at a time when rapid response is essential, and ultimately lead to a systemic failure.

It must also be acknowledged that the R&P has the capacity to include nested failures and successes. A malfunction in one or multiple functions can sometimes cause a domino effect. For instance, a delay in releasing authorization can impact distribution of budget or interagency cooperation. Again, this hamper intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination. Yet there are instances where one of the mandate-level functions may fail while others perform properly (for example, rapid deployment of resources and authorizations might succeed, but interagency collaboration may falter). As a result, it is possible to observe case where successes are nested within broader failures, and vice versa.

This is not to say that the R&P process or its components of the intelligence mandate will always fail. In fact, there are instances of R&P successes, such as the mandate shift that occurred during the Clinton administration's rapid evacuation of US foreign nationals at the start of the Rwandan genocide. The R&P process, when conducted properly, can lead to a higher chance of success in national security endeavors. Nor is there an assertion here that failure always stems from the R&P process. Some failures are the result of errors made in intelligence collection and analysis. However, empirical evidence suggests that intelligence communities tend to consistently deliver accurate intelligence when they are directed to observe an issue. However, if there is no political will, the community cannot expend finite resources on a task that their consumer considers unimportant.

Problematically, an issue in any of the mandate-level functions often manifest as delays or errors of intelligence collection or analysis. Because of this, mandate failures often take the appearance of intelligence failures. Thus, mandate malfunctions can create a 'false positive,' a misdiagnosis that leads to incorrect accusations. On many occasions, this can result in reforms that do not sufficiently address the root causes of failure.

Postmortem misdiagnosis: failing to address mandate failure

In the aftermath of egregious failure, accusations leveled against the intelligence community are common, and to the benefit of the policymakers (Jervis,

2010, p. 1). Hearings call upon intelligence community leaders to respond to accusations and defend agency or community actions. In some cases, the head of state, Cabinet, or a Congressional or Parliamentary subset may commission investigations. These examinations tend to focus nearly exclusively on department or agency level functions, forgoing broader observation, and neglecting to ask whether the intelligence community was initially given the direction and means to observe an issue in the first place. This is a glaring gap; one that neglects consideration of political will and the performance of the R&P mechanism, and holds the intelligence community at fault for doing as it is told. As a result, recommendations for change tend to center around intelligence structures, functions, and methods, overlooking any corrections to systemic processes.

Ironically, subtle nods to the R&P process tend to appear where partisan political competition exists. Intelligence has often been used as a political weapon, and failure benefits the adversary. Failure to support intelligence needs can become weaponized by the opposition. For instance, in 1960, John F. Kennedy and the Democratic Party used information obtained from Strategic Air Command against incumbent Republican President Dwight Eisenhower. Kennedy and the Democrats argued that Eisenhower was weak on defense, and as a result, the Soviets had a greater number of nuclear weapons than the US – a "missile gap" (Miller, n.d.). The allegation is believed to have been a significant force-multiplier for the Democratic Party, and is attributed to helping Kennedy win the election. By using intelligence to make claims of policy failure, political adversaries implicitly acknowledge the requirements and priorities process by suggesting that the administration ignored, manipulated, or incorrectly identified priorities. Intelligence becomes an instrument of battle because the mandate enmeshes the communities.

Perhaps the most compelling reason that the R&P is not factored into postmortem investigations is because of what it may reveal. For instance, information such as budget distribution could result in the revelation of secret information should canny mathematicians reverse-engineer the figures. Further still, publicizing this information leaves both communities to contend with public opinion on how much should be spent, and toward which aims. While this is a valid argument for not publicly releasing findings, it does not prevent such investigations from occurring behind closed doors.

It is more likely that investigations focus on intelligence activity because failure is in the eye of the beholder, who in this case is intelligence consumer. Decision makers have the advantage of deciding whether the intelligence provided is sufficient to their needs. To a policymaker, sufficiency can be measured in part by the quantity of information provided. A common misconception is that failure stems from a lack of reports provided to policymakers. This may be true in conditions where subtle changes are reported over a protracted period of time, causing the reader to overlook the differences, or

losing their attention altogether. In some cases, however, when a decision maker claims that intelligence was insufficient, they are not referring to the *amount* provided, but to the *certainty* of the reporting. Again, this is sometimes a result of a policymaker's inability to understand the limitations of intelligence. The word "estimates" is used to refer to intelligence products because they are not certainties. However, if a policymaker feels that the certainty of estimates is insufficient, they can argue that the intelligence community failed. In short, failure becomes a matter of perspective. This defense mechanism becomes particularly visible if policy leadership fails to respond, or responds belatedly or incorrectly to a crisis despite having received early warning. A policymaker may argue that intelligence was inadequate or uncertain, or that intelligence reports failed to call attention to an urgent matter. However, even this argument belies an underlying weakness exists in failure to engage in the R&P process. Consultations between the communities allow the consumer to give an indication of their expectations, and allow the consumer to explain the limitations of intelligence.

In some respects, part of the reason that R&P and the wider mandate are not considered is simply because it is a huge undertaking. The R&P is bigger than a single target, a single department, or a single community. It is a mechanism that absorbs the universe of potential intelligence targets, and binds every actor in national security and foreign policy to a unified national agenda. Compliance to the national targets vary by department or agency, yet the R&P remains an omnipresent machine that sits in the background and guides nearly every action taken in the communities. As Davies points out, "There is a very real and pronounced preference for speaking and writing about agencies and almost an aversion to discussing interagency mechanisms and processes"(Davies, 2012, p. 32). If examining agencies or departments is a formidable task, factoring in the R&P can seem insurmountable. As a result, the tendency is to zoom in from the macroscopic and observe smaller components. It follows then, that when addressing outcomes from national security or foreign policy events, the same mind-set would follow. Examinations are limited to department or agency levels.

Conclusion: common enterprise and collective responsibility

As one CIA official has stated, "the 'requirements system' has few friends. It is untidy, encumbered by process, and generally unaccountable" (Kennedy, 2008, p. 13). Yet it remains the necessary evil that binds the communities. Betts takes a realistic approach to the efficacy of reforms in the intelligence community and concludes that organizational or structural reforms to intelligence analysis can marginally mitigate failure, but will never eliminate it (Betts, 1978, p. 61). Sweeping reforms are more likely to result in temporary or emblematic changes, especially if those reforms strain the organization's

resources, or do not fulfil operational needs. In the US, this has been evidenced by multiple attempts to entirely overhaul the R&P process, most notably by Directors of Central intelligence William Colby and Stansfield Turner (Laqueur, 1993, p. 94), whose intrepid attempts resulted dueling bureaucracies, increased confusion, and ultimately, quiet retreat to the original method.

Betts argues that organizational solutions to intelligence failure are hindered by three key issues: first, reforms addressing one analytic issue may cause problems elsewhere. Second, changes to the analytic processes will not overcome the intrinsic ambiguity within analysis. Finally, reform to a procedure or mechanism cannot offset the predispositions and time constraints of political consumers. Because these are built-in features associated with any bureaucratic system, there can be no panacea to prevent intelligence failures. The goal then, is to incrementally improve the apparatus through modest refinements. This requires both communities to assess the costs and benefits of the available options. The intelligence community cannot address every hypothetical threat or vulnerability; its resources are finite. Nor can the joint communities provide equal distribution of resources across vulnerabilities. This does not guarantee sufficient coverage; some areas require more (or more diverse) resources. Finally, reinforcing resources in one area means potentially leaving a gap in another. The goal then, is to determine the most effective priorities. To limit uncertainty and achieve mutual objectives requires formal cooperation and agreement, and it is here where the requirements and priorities process becomes paramount.

There is currently no single method of investigation utilized to observe outcomes in the aftermath of a national security or foreign policy event. As a result, the myriad strategies result in different and isolated areas of focus, concentrating separately on policy, agency, or department activities without observing the systemic functions that link them. A strategy of after-action investigation that incorporates an assessment of the R&P could, ideally, become a component of the directions process itself. Over time, regular appraisals of the process would result in a catalog of assessments. This can be done during scheduled consultation periods, or as a component of examinations of intelligence efficacy, as well as in postmortem studies. Equal points of comparison over a series of assessments can serve as a secondary audit trail, allowing the joint communities to pin-point common threads of concern and identify consistent weaknesses and strengths. In turn, this can foster dialogue and reinforce accountability. In the long-term, examinations of R&P may also lead the government to consider whether intelligence agencies are being utilized in the best possible manner. In the US, this is increasingly critical. The consistent criticism of the intelligence community in the aftermath of failure can weaken the national security apparatus (Rovner, 2005, p. 3). Joshua Rovner points out that the scapegoating of the intelligence community has a price. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, scapegoating damaged morale in

the USIC, and led to "an exodus of career officers," causing a large, costly reorganization of the intelligence community (Rovner, 2005, p. 3). Approaching failure from a systemic perspective allows discussion to transition from what the intelligence community did wrong to what the joint communities can improve. In this manner, the government has a better chance of retaining the cumulative years of knowledge dedicated to national security.

Perhaps most critically, utilization and optimization of the requirements and priorities process requires a functional relationship between the top leadership figures in both communities. At the top levels, poor relationships between the intelligence lead and his political counterparts can hamper the efficacy of the collaborative structure. The intelligence director, in establishing support for his efforts, must walk a fine line of garnering support from the head of state, while cautiously avoiding angering Cabinet leaders who seek to protect their position and the status of their department-led intelligence agencies. Acrimony or mistrust has historically hampered communication between the institutions and amongst cabinet-led departments, resulting in poor coordination and upkeep of national priorities. The current political climate in the United States serves as a point worthy of observation. The Trump White House has expressed dissatisfaction with individual members and departments of the intelligence community, resulting an erosion of trust, and both voluntary and involuntary exits of career civil servants.

The requirements and priorities process is an understated yet intrinsic, inescapable component of intelligence production. It requires acknowledgment and examination, including top level reflection that is at times an uncommon condition in politics. But in the absence of its rigorous application, borne of a genuine desire to improve the prospects for national security, the cycle of limited and fruitless recommendations will continue to haunt an enfeebled system.

ORCID

Neveen S. Abdalla 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0095-5697
Philip H.J. Davies 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3820-8862

References

9/11 commission report: The official report of the 9/11 commission and related publications. (2004). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Alexander, J. (1964). An intelligence role for the footnote: For and against. *Studies in Intelligence*, *8*(3), 59–69.

Allan, R. T., & McConnaughey, D. (2007). More against footnotes. *United States, Central Intelligence Agency*. Retrieved from www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol8no4/html/v08i4a09p_0001.htm

Betts, R. (1978). Analysis, war, and decision: Why intelligence failures are inevitable. *World Politics*, *31*(1), 61–89. doi:10.2307/2009967

Betts, R. K. (2009). *Enemies of intelligence: Knowledge and power in American National Security*. Columbia University Press.

Cabinet Office, United Kingdom. (2009). *Improving the central intelligence machinery*. Her Majesty's Stationary Office.

Clapper, J. (2015). Intelligence community directive 204- National intelligence priorities framework. *United States Director of National Intelligence*. Retrieved from https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD_204.pdf

Dahl, E. J. (2013). *Intelligence and surprise attack: Failure and success from pearl harbor to 9/11 and beyond*. Georgetown University Press.

Davies, P. H. J. (2010). Britain's machinery of intelligence oversight: Realistic oversight in the absence of moral panic. In D. Baldino (Ed.), *Democratic oversight of intelligence services*. Arndale, Australia: The Federation Press.

Davies, P. H. J. (2012). *Intelligence and government in Britain and the United States: A comparative perspective: A comparative perspective* (Vol. 1, pp. ABC–CLIO).

Davies, P. H. J., & Glees, A. (2004). *Butler's dilemma: Lord Butler's inquiry and the re-assessment of intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction*. The Social Affairs Unit.

Franks, L. O. (1983). *Falkland Islands review: Report of a committee of privy counsellors* (Vol. 8787). HM Stationery Office.

Glees, A., Davies, P. H. J., & Morrison, J. N. L. (2006). *The open side of secrecy: Britain's intelligence and security committee* (pp. 61–68). London: Social Affairs Unit.

Grabo, C. M., & Goldman, J. (2002). *Anticipating surprise: Analysis for strategic warning*. Washington, D.C: Center for Strategic Intelligence Research, Joint Military Intelligence College.

Holland, M. (2005). The "Photo Gap" that delayed discovery of missiles in Cuba. *Studies in Intelligence*, *49*(4), 15–30.

House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (1996). IC21: The intelligence community in the 21st century. Staff study. 104th Congress, 2nd Session. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Hulnick, A. S. (2006). What's wrong with the intelligence cycle? *Intelligence and National Security*, *21*(6), 959–979. doi:10.1080/02684520601046291

Jervis, R. (2010). *Why intelligence fails: Lessons from the Iranian revolution and the Iraq War*. Cornell University Press.

Johnson, L. K. (1989). *America's secret power: The CIA in a democratic society*. Oxford University Press.

Johnson, L. K. (2012). *National security intelligence: Secret operations in defense of the democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kennedy, R. (2008). *Of knowledge and power: The complexities of national intelligence*. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International.

Kent, S. (1964). Words of estimative probability. *Studies in Intelligence*, *8*(4), 49–65.

Laqueur, W. (1993). *The uses and limits of intelligence*. NY, USA: Routledge.

Lowenthal, M. (2015). *Intelligence: From secrets to policy*. Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press.

Miller, J. (n.d.). Distorting Intelligence: "The Missile Gap". *United States Naval Academy*. Retrieved from https://www.usna.com/tributes-and-stories—stories-1942?#MissileGap

National Commission for the Review of the National Reconnaissance Office, Final Report. (2000). Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office.

Obama, B. P. (2008). Executive order 13470 -Further amendments to executive order 12333. *United States Intelligence Activities*. Retrieved from http://Dodsioo.Defense.Gov/Library/Eo12333.Aspx

Overshine, R. P., & Foley, R. J. (1955). *Report of survey of the national security agency (appendix to the clark task force on intelligence)* (CIA-RDP86B00269R000900010001-0). CIA Research Tool (CREST), National Archives and Record Administration.

Pillar, P. R. (2011). *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform.* Columbia University Press.

Pollack, K. (2004). *The Persian puzzle: Deciphering the twenty-five-year conflict between the United States and Iran.* Random House.

PRC Meeting on Iran. (1978, November 6). Memorandum, November 3, 1978. As found in Byrne, Malcolm, ed. *The Carter Administration and the "Arc of Crisis": Iran, Afghanistan, and the Cold War in Southern* Asia, *1977-1981.* Retrieved from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-carter-administration-and-the-arc-crisis-iran-afghanistan-and-the-cold-war-southern

Puderbaugh, R. T. (2011). Elegant writing in the clandestine services. *United States. Central Intelligence Agency.* Retrieved from www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol16no1/html/v16i1a01p_0001.htm

Report by the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy: Background and Principal Recommendations (Murphy Commission). (1975). Volume 7. Washington D.C.

Riebling, M. (2010). *Wedge: From pearl harbor to 9/11: How the secret war between the FBI and CIA has endangered national security.* Simon and Schuster.

Robertson, K. G. (1988). Accountable Intelligence—The British experience. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, *8*(1), 13–28.

Rovner, J. (2005). Why intelligence isn't to blame for 9/11. MIT Center for International Studies. *Audit of the Conventional Wisdom*, *5*(13).

Tenet, G. (2000). *The worldwide threat in 2000.* United States: Director of Central Intelligence.

United States Defense Technical Information Center. (2011). Interorganizational coordination during joint operations. Joint publication 3-08: Joint intelligence. *I-6.* Retrieved from http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_08.pdf .

United States of America. Office of the President. (1995, Mar 2). Presidential decision directive 35- Intelligence requirements. Federation of American Scientists. Retrieved from http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd35.htm

United States, Congress, strategic investment plan for intelligence community analysis (pp. 47–51). (2001). Central Intelligence Agency.

United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, & Church, F. (1976). *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate: Together with Additional, Supplemental and Separate Views.* US Government Printing Office.

Warner, M. (2007). Sources and methods for the study of intelligence. In L. K. Johnson (Ed.), *Handbook of intelligence studies* (pp. 17–27). London: Routledge.

Zegart, A. B. (2009). *Spying blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the origins of 9/11.* Princeton University Press.