THE JOINT INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE AND READING THE RUSSIAN MINDSET: LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Date: November 23, 2021

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2021, Professor Michael Goodman of King's College London, presented on *The Joint Intelligence Committee and Reading the Russian Mindset* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed in this presentation included an overview of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), evaluation of their predictions and actions against Russian threats, and the conditions they put forward to demonstrate that a country would wage war.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The JIC is a committee that brings together different concepts of intelligence to provide the military with the best possible solution or counterattack measures in the case of war. Considering the JIC is responsible for coordinating intelligence assessments, Professor Goodman evaluated the predictions and assessments that have been made by the JIC and its effectiveness in terms of predicting Russian threats.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Professor Goodman began his presentation by highlighting that the JIC is composed of heads of intelligence agencies and civil servants in policy-making departments. It is important to note that the JIC does not include ministers or any elected governmental politicians. The JIC is a committee based on consensus, and it is responsible for coordinating intelligence assessments, scrutinising the

performance of the agencies, and covering issues of immediate and long-term importance.

Following the Second World War, new unknown threats emerged, and as Russia was beginning to leave the Soviet Union, the JIC had no good intelligence about what the Russians were going to do. As a result, the JIC prepared an elaborate list of indicators and warnings from the adoption of an American list that had 112 different indicators. When enough of these indicators were red, it suggested that there was a potential risk. For example, in 1948, the JIC reported that Russia was planning something, but they didn't know what, how, or when. Shortly after that, all of the transport links into Berlin were cut off.

The ability to predict was very important during the Cold War. The importance of prediction was not just about predicting Soviet capabilities, weapons, programs, or atomic arsenal, but about Soviet intentions and what the Russian leadership in the Kremlin could do, which proved to be an enormous problem. Several assessments and summary papers had provided statistics that were unable to tell the whole story. This was about 30 out of 33 assessments being correct and 3 incorrect, which were very significant for the overall ability to predict incoming threats such as the failure to forecast the Berlin Blockade.

Another example was the North Korean invasion of South Korea, which kickstarted the Korean War in 1950. In addition, nobody in London was able to predict China's involvement. The key issue was the way that reports were written, and the assessments presented to policy makers. It was often reported that the JIC papers were too vague and lacked concreteness in terms of what they were predicting.

The consensus in the UK was that the Russians would not initiate war deliberately. According to the JIC, there were three elements in predicting what the Russians were going to do. The first one was gauging intent by drawing intelligence, which could inform the JIC of incoming Russian threats; second, monitoring capabilities such as aircraft development, increasing missile development, nuclear development, and the operating procedures of the Soviet army to be able to predict the degree of threat that they may uphold; third, figuring out how the JIC could navigate and read the Russian mindset. However, such assessments or elements to predict a Soviet attack became an issue.

In the late 1960s, Alexander Dubček, a reforming communist who was leaning towards a liberal era, set in motion a few changes that were not seen as a good thing. During that time, great intelligence effort went into predicting whether the

Russians would clamp down on Alexander Dubček's agenda or if they would allow him to push on with the liberal enterprises. Dubček's presence and ideas became an important

In the summer of 1968, despite seeing a large Warsaw Pact military exercise with about 25,000 troops taking place on Czech territory, the JIC concluded that Soviet military intervention was unlikely. Foreign office analysts's assessment was based on the idea that sending in tanks would be counterproductive and affect any progress. This assessment proved to be wrong when, in August 1968, a quarter of a million troops invaded Czechoslovakia and Dubček was captured and taken to Moscow.

The problem was mostly in trying to join the political assessments with military assessments and trying to get into the Russian perspective. According to the Nicoll Report, the issue of mirror imaging and transfer judgment, which entails trying to see through the opposite lens to help understand the perspective of the other side, can never be accurate at predicting the issues because it is impossible to escape one's own mindset. Additionally, the Nicoll Report also suggested the idea that the assessments made early on in a crisis were unlikely to change even if intelligence suggested they had been wrong.

Professor Goodman concluded his presentation by noting that the JIC's old assessments and views allow a better understanding of what to expect from the modern intelligence community as they try to predict what is happening. According to the JIC, if a country was planning on invading another country, it could be predicted if the country concerned had the political will to undertake such action; if military action would achieve a political end; and if specific military preparations had already begun. For the UK model, there were problems with assessment, as well as consensus in terms of how to bring together all the different elements if the ultimate objective is to reach consensus. Professor Goodman highlighted that assessing failure is easy because it is obvious, but it is more difficult to know when success has been achieved. An assessment failure, for example, could have a successful result but that might not always be the case.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The JIC is responsible for coordinating intelligence assessments, scrutinising the performance of the agencies, and covering issues of immediate and long-term importance.

- The JIC is composed of heads of intelligence agencies and civil servants in policy-making departments, and it does not include elected governmental politicians.
- Predicting Soviet intentions was particularly important during the Cold War.
- JIC's expectations and predictions were interrupted by the involvement of Alexander Dubček, a reforming communist leaning towards a liberal era.
- The JIC's assessment failures, in terms of Russia, was the attempt to join political assessments with military assessments and trying to get into the Russian perspective.

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING