



WHAT SHOULD INTELLIGENCE PRIORITIES BE GIVEN THE STATE OF HEGEMONIC INSTABILITY?

Date: November 15, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 15, 2023, Dr. Loch K. Johnson, Regents Professor Emeritus of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia, presented *What Should Intelligence Priorities Be Given The State of Hegemonic Instability?* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the history of US intelligence prioritization, the need for increased attention towards universal threats, and the need for open societies to share intelligence tasking and findings with each other.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Johnson provided an overview of priorities of intelligence tasking since the Cold War, tracking the focus on support for military operations (SMO) versus other forms of intelligence such as environmental, health and economic intelligence. Dr. Johnson detailed the history and benefits of environmental intelligence programs such as Project MADEA, as well as the existential risks of universal threats such as climate change. Dr. Johnson concluded by illustrating the need for increased intelligence sharing between open societies such as those comprising Five Eyes to better address universal threats.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Johnson illustrated that in the United States during the Cold War, support for military operations (SMO) was overwhelmingly prioritized, receiving 80-85% of the annual intelligence budget, and most of this budget was spent by the Secretary

for Defense rather than by the Director of Central Intelligence or the Director of National Intelligence.

Dr. Johnson noted that in the United States, current intelligence tasking priorities are determined by threat assessment meetings held by the National Security Council (NSC), and threats are categorized into different tiers of importance. Tier 0 covers inplay US war fighting Zones; Tier 1A may cover Russian and Chinese Military Capabilities and Intentions; Tier 1B may include topics such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; Tier 2 includes lesser concerns such as Chinese foreign aid in Latin America; Tier 3 can include topics such as the flow of conventional weaponry to groups of concern in Africa; and Tier 4 can include topics such as the threat of drug cartels. He stated that Tier 0-2 topics receive the lion's share of US espionage resources.

Dr. Johnson noted that the Soviet Union was a persistent Tier 1A priority; however, defense spending and the prioritization of SMO significantly decreased after the Cold War. After 1991, the United States was faced by a broader assortment of security threats and opportunities, which required attention through a more expansive set of intelligence collection priorities. He highlighted the inclusion of the NCS assessing the importance of Environmental Intelligence during the Clinton Administration. Over 800,000 spy satellite photographs relevant to the interests of private sector US environmental scientists were declassified and an environmental center was created at the CIA. This center shared said photos with US scientists under Project MADEA, in return for assistance assessing the national security implications of environmental degradation and climate change. MADEA was halted during the Bush 2 and Trump Administrations.

Diversification of intelligence tasking has also included increased attention toward terrorism, economic intelligence, and health intelligence. In 2008, the National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI) was created, where the Pentagon saw a greater need for health intelligence to protect US troops stationed globally from exotic diseases. Dr. Johnson stated that during the Trump Administration, the NCMI provided early warning about the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, and the access to CIA information gathered through human reporting grants it an advantage over global health agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO). Dr. Johnson said that while intelligence tasking has diversified following the Cold War, SMO still has remained dominant. There was a resurgence of SMO with the 2003 Second Gulf War, which has continued out of concerns related to Russia, China, North Korea, and the Middle East.

Dr. Johnson stated that increased attention to universal threats such as climate change and pandemics would provide valuable data. Dr. Johnson emphasized that the future of global democracy depends on the ability of open societies such as the Five Eyes to share intelligence tasking and findings with each other. Dr. Johnson said that this year, university scientists reported globally that fine particulate matter air pollution posed the greatest threat to public health.

Question and Answer

What strategies should we be using to train and prepare leaders and the next generation of intelligence practitioners?

In an academic context, Dr. Johnson emphasized the use of group activities, community service, and internships to teach students leadership and teamwork.

With the ever-increasing average global ambient air temperature and record high temperatures every year, has there been a revision of MADEA or any new programs on environmental security, especially in conjunction with the big carbon polluters?

Dr. Johnson said no; while the Biden administration would seem open to such a program, it is distracted by numerous ongoing global issues including a re-emergent cold war, the global economy, the war in Ukraine, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Dr. Johnson stated that despite this, we should also direct more attention towards the issue of climate change, which is possibly the greatest threat. Presently we are faced with what Eisenhower might refer to as a military-industrial-intelligence complex, where vested interests have seen an over-allocation of funds toward high-cost products like large satellites at the expense of other taskings, such as health intelligence.

What is your view on the common usage of the term “Intelligence Community” and how do you ensure that such a community is perceived as apolitical and not an extension of the executive branch of government, especially in times of ideological polarization?

Dr. Johnson stated that the notion of community is a good idea, as there is a need for teamwork and “holistic intelligence” as a combined product of all forms of intelligence. The idea of an intelligence community needs to be expanded to include parliamentarians and lawmakers for oversight. A balance can be struck between the coordination benefits and counterintelligence risks of sharing intelligence between agencies. Issues like torture or helping with environmental problems has more relevance to the public perception and relations of agencies

like the CIA, and there is a general need to better educate the public of the work of intelligence agencies through means such as public hearings.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Since the Cold War, there has been a general trend of overemphasis on support for military operations (SMO), at the expense of other forms of intelligence such as environmental, health, and economic intelligence.
- Environmental intelligence, which has been underemphasized apart from the Clinton and Obama administrations, is fundamental to addressing climate change, which may be the greatest security threat facing humanity.
- Intelligence findings and taskings should be shared more between open societies such as those comprising Five Eyes to better confront universal threats such as climate change.
- The public should be better educated about the work of intelligence agencies through means such as public hearings, and the idea of an intelligence community needs to be expanded to include parliamentarians and lawmakers for better oversight.

KEY READINGS

Phythian, M. (2022). Profiles in intelligence: An interview with Professor Loch K. Johnson. *Intelligence and National Security*, 37(7), 939-967.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2116180>

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