the ability of analysts (and sometimes entire agencies) to access certain types of information and to integrate insights from multiple intelligence disciplines. It was, in effect, a situation that sometimes compelled analysts to work difficult problems without being able to collaborate with counterparts in other agencies. That was never desirable, and good analysts and responsible managers often found ways to overcome the inherent strictures of the distinction. But in the fast-paced, information-rich, and highly demanding environment of the 21st century, sharing information and capturing the insights of informed colleagues cannot be a function of individual initiative and creative workarounds.2

The potential perils of bureaucratic andbehavioral impediments to information sharing, all-source analysis, and collaboration among analysts with complementary skills were tragically revealed by the events of September 11, 2001 and the post-mortem analysis of the 9/11 Commission.3 Few consequences of failure to access and incorporate information from all available sources will be as dramatic or tragic as were the events of 9/11, but the purpose of intelligence analysis is to help decision makers anticipate, understand, and manage developments with the potential to affect the security of our nation, the safety of our citizens, and the interests of our country. They deserve and demand nothing less than the best possible analytic support. That, in turn, requires tapping all available sources of information, integrating the insights of numerous specialists, and applying high standards of analytic tradecraft.

The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 was designed, among other goals, to break down obstacles to information sharing and to facilitate collaboration and “all-source analysis” of the wide and expanding range of national security issues.4 To meet the challenges of the 21st century, we can no longer tolerate false distinctions between “all-source” and “single-INT” analysts or agencies. Stated another way, providing high-quality analysis and enhancing policymaker understanding of complex developments

---


require utilizing all types of information and the insights of everyone who can contribute. Information sharing and collaboration are now essential attributes of intelligence analysis. For example, imagery analysts need (and have) access to SIGINT and HUMINT that could help them to determine the purpose of a construction project. Diplomatic reporting and SIGINT are useful to determine the veracity or biases of a clandestine HUMINT source. Freely available unclassified materials (Open Source Intelligence or OSINT) provides context for all kinds of other reporting. In other words, all analysts are—and must be—all-source analysts.

All-source analysis entails more than simply making more intelligence available to more analysts. Probably the most important attribute is the systematic way that it utilizes information from multiple and varied sources to assess, interpret, and explain a development, discovery, or policy conundrum. Step one is to identify or define what it is that needs to be explained. Unless an analytic challenge is defined with reasonable precision, it is impossible to know what kinds of information might help to clarify what has occurred, why it happened, where developments appear to be headed, and other critical dimensions of the problem. Stated another way, unless one can specify with reasonable precision what needs to be explained, it is hard to know where to look for answers or what types of information and expertise might be most helpful. Simply amassing information on the assumption that “the answer must be in there somewhere” is seldom an effective strategy and can be highly counterproductive.

Defining and redefining the core question is often an iterative process but the ideal starting point should be, “What question, if it can be answered, will provide the most useful insight into the phenomenon being studied?” This will typically be followed by subsequent questions such as, “What kinds of information are most likely to help me to answer the core question?” and “Where might I obtain that kind of information?” Some core questions can be answered using publicly available information (OSINT); others can best be addressed using imagery or SIGINT. Most analysts prefer to have multiple sources that can be used to corroborate or raise questions about what has been reported or revealed by other sources. Generally speaking, one can have higher confidence in information that comes from multiple sources and/or types of sources but, as every analyst must learn, sometimes information truly is “too good to be true” because its purpose is to mislead. This is what is known in the intelligence business as disinformation. Distinguishing disinformation from reliable intelligence requires both skill and familiarity with the characteristics of individual types of sources and how the same or related information is reflected in other sources.

Redefining the key question to be examined benefits from, and often requires, obtaining and integrating information from colleagues who are familiar with the subject matter but may—and preferably do—approach the subject from different directions and utilize different types of information. The structure of the US Intelligence Community—16 agencies plus the Office of the Director of National Intelligence supporting dozens of bureaucratic organizations and missions and hundreds of customers—assures the existence of multiple perspectives on almost every issue. Although it makes for untidy organization charts and invites suspicion and accusations of duplication of effort, the structure of the IC creates strengths as well as weaknesses. The primary reason for the existence of multiple agencies is to optimize abilities to support specific missions and customers. One-size-fits-all intelligence is not very useful to anyone; to be useful, intelligence must be tailored to the needs of specific customers. Simply put, the Secretary of State requires different types of intelligence and intelligence support than do the Secretary of Defense, the Attorney General, or the Commander of US Forces in Korea.

Each agency has assembled people with different types of expertise and trained them to focus on using what they know and what they can discover to support the missions of their primary customers. The result is a considerable amount of complementary expertise and independently developed analyses that can be integrated to achieve more holistic understanding of difficult problems. The structure and different missions also facilitate specialization and divisions of labor that enable the IC as a whole to cover more issues more effectively than would otherwise be the case. The existence of multiple agencies reporting to different cabinet-level superiors also has a downside in that it fosters and perpetuates organizational pathologies found in all large enterprises (e.g., unhealthy rivalries, reluctance to trust “competitors,” and other impediments to collaboration).^5^

---


Although many structural elements of the US IC are conducive to collaboration across agency boundaries and among analysts with complementary experience and expertise (including in the use of particular types of sources), the amount of collaboration—and all-source analysis—were long-constrained by bureaucratic rivalries and incentives to work problems without substantial input from other agencies or analysts. The 9/11 Commission and other studies critical of impediments to “information sharing” captured a portion of this malady but impeded access to information from “all sources” was only part of the problem and was probably the easiest to address. The more important dimension of the problem was that too many analysts could not easily seek or obtain analytic insights from colleagues elsewhere in the Community.

Perhaps the most important reasons all-source analysis is essential are the complexity of the issues the Intelligence Community is expected to address, the volume of information that might be germane to understanding those issues, the often short timelines within which analytic input is required if it is to be useful, and the consequentiality of many decisions made by the United States government. In other words, the problems are hard; there is lots of information, albeit never as much as one desires and often of uneven quality; deadlines are short; and decisions affecting US interests can be very important to our nation and our relationships with other countries. Because the decisions matter, it is imperative that they be as well informed as possible. It is the responsibility of the Intelligence Community to ensure that they are.

The first requisite for analytic collaboration/all-source analysis is ready access to information and ease of sharing and discussing information with colleagues everywhere in the IC. “Need to know” has been replaced by “responsibility to provide” because “collectors” and other information stewards cannot possibly know the full range of analysts who might find a given piece of intelligence helpful or, if queried about the information in a given report, might be able to provide insights helpful to others. There are, and must be, some restrictions on access, but the working criterion is—and must be—that “all” information, of whatever source or type, must be accessible to all analysts with the clearances required for access to all but a small percentage of all intelligence.7 Universal access facilitates collaboration and all-source analysis because analysts no longer have to guess whether a particular colleague, especially one that is not known to him or her, has access to a particular report or stream of reporting.

A second requisite is to be able to tap expertise wherever it exists, certainly anywhere in the Intelligence Community and, sometimes, anywhere inside or outside the United States government. This entails being able to discover and consider the perspectives of experts who utilize different types of information and interpret it using criteria appropriate to the missions they support (i.e., the different perspectives that result from the structure of the IC). Sometimes this entails soliciting information, insights, and advice from colleagues with whom one has worked previously and may take the form of “Do you have any information that would help me to understand this puzzle?” or “Which of these alternative hypotheses do you think best fits the data we have on this subject?” At other times, the analyst seeking help from colleagues can post a general inquiry within “A-Space” or on “Intellipedia” asking whether anyone has information or insights that might clarify the question he or she is trying to answer.8 Such inquiries, and “publicly” posted exchanges among analysts who may not know one another, are the most “all-source” of all because they have the potential to tap different sources and types of information, different analytic perspectives, and the expertise of people in other organizations with whom the requesting analyst has had no previous contact.

A third requisite for all-source analysis is transparency in the analytic process; analysts must “show their homework” and anyone who looks at the analytic process should be able to determine without difficulty what sources were used, the degree of confidence in the sources, whether there is intelligence that contradicts or is inconsistent with that used to reach analytic judgments and, if so, why it was considered less reliable, what assumptions were used to close information gaps, why sources were evaluated and weighted as they were, and so on. In other words, the

---


analytic tradecraft must be as transparent as possible. This applies to “single INT” judgments as well as to all-source judgments. For example, an imagery analyst who determines that the crate sitting on a dock contains a particular type of missile from a specific country must explain why he or she came to that conclusion. Most of the time, the explanation will derive from information gleaned from multiple sources and types of analysis.

The primary missions of intelligence analysis are to reduce uncertainty, provide warning, and identify opportunities for intervention to change the course of events. Achieving these missions cannot be accomplished by passively waiting to see what types of information dribble into the electronic in-box. To provide the timely, targeted, and consequential support desired and demanded by those who rely on the Intelligence Community, analysts must formulate questions designed to provide insight, give guidance to collectors on where to look for information that might help answer the question, and enlist the help of colleagues with complementary expertise, better knowledge of specific information streams, or alternative perspectives on the problem. Seeking help wherever it might be available, from whoever might have something to contribute is the essence of all-source analysis. In a growing number of cases, it is also the only practical way to provide the kinds of support required by the US national security enterprise.

Reading for Instructors

The readings recommended here provide additional detail and perspectives on the roles and characteristics of all-source intelligence analysis.


Books containing short articles, many written by intelligence analysts, on the relationship of analysis to specific intelligence and policymaking arenas, include...


Excellent books on intelligence analysis by academics include...


Two volumes recently published by the National Research Council examine similarities and differences between intelligence analysis and the challenges of working complex problems in other organizational contexts. They are...


Dr. Thomas Fingar is the Oksenberg-Rohlen Distinguished Fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. From 2005 through 2008, he served as the first Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis and, concurrently, as Chairman of the National Intelligence Council. He was previously Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence Research. Dr. Fingar received his BA (Government and History) from Cornell, and his MA and PhD degrees (Political Science) from Stanford. He taught and held a number of research positions at Stanford from 1975 to 1986. He is a career member of the Senior Executive Service and recipient of the Presidential Rank Award for Distinguished Senior Professionals and the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal.