Strategic Warning and the Role of Intelligence
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(Welcoming remarks)

It is a particular pleasure to return to my first intellectual love: Eastern Europe. I was drawn to this field by the tragedy of '68, studied Czech at Charles University in Prague in 1977, and have been back to Prague at least a dozen times since then. And my first book and other early scholarship were on Soviet-East European relations. (I've noticed that the market for my *oeuvre* on the Warsaw Pact is not as brisk as it once was! You can bid for some of those items on eBay or look for them at a remaindered bin near you.)

Let me start with two vignettes. First, traveling with Secretary Baker in Prague in early 1990, I spoke with two of President Vaclav Havel's advisors, who recounted that they were walking with Havel in a corridor in Prague Castle wondering aloud how Havel might contact Gorbachev, when a security official appeared from behind a secret compartment with a telephone wired into the Warsaw Pact circuit. They had not known about the circuit, the hidden compartment, or the "man behind the wall." It made one wonder how many other ghosts from the past were hiding behind the walls of post-Communist East Europe. (Incidentally, when Havel made his first visit to the White House later that year, two of us on the NSC staff – Condi Rice and I – spoke Czech. We spoke it badly, but never mind.)

The second vignette comes from early 1992, when Havel called Russian President Boris Yeltsin right after the collapse of the USSR. Yeltsin told Havel that he had found in his (until recently, Gorbachev's) office in the Kremlin a sealed letter marked "Never to be Opened." He of course opened it right away and found inside the notorious "letter from Czechoslovak comrades" inviting the Soviet invasion. Most of us who had followed these events concluded that such a letter never existed, but here it was, signed by five senior Czechoslovak communist officials.

It is tempting to talk about the '68 events with you, but I have been away from this scholarship for a long time, so let me retreat to the main heading of the conference: Strategic Warning and the Role of Intelligence. I will break this into three parts, which I will address in the form of questions. First, why so many "intelligence failures?" Second, why policy makers do not want strategic intelligence analysis (but why they need it anyway)? And third, how to reform the intelligence reforms? So I will talk about intelligence, analysis, and policy, with a focus on warning.

1. The Era of Intelligence Failures

When I took over as Chairman of the National Intelligence Council in early 2003, the received wisdom, in the public discourse at least, was that the 9/11 terrorist attacks represented a massive intelligence failure. The intelligence community, it was said, failed to "connect the dots." But as I soon discovered (though I knew this already), there was a vast universe of dots related to possible terrorist threats. The challenge was to know which ones to connect. It's easier said than done.

Was 9/11 a "massive intelligence failure?" It was clearly a massive tragedy, but if "intelligence failure" meant that those attacks could have been prevented with reasonably good intelligence performance, I'm not so sure. It is a very serious charge that needs to be looked at seriously, and it should be noted that the 9/11 Commission stopped short of reaching such a damning judgment.

Psychologists have produced a good body of literature on "hindsight bias" (*Rucksicht Fehler*, in German), defined as "the tendency of people to falsely believe that they would have predicted the outcome of an event once the outcome is known." Because outcome information affects the selection of evidence, a critic falling victim to hindsight bias tends to see clear lines of causation where such clarity was in fact lacking before the fact. Only after the fact does it become clear which dots to connect. More than that, connecting dots in the counterterrorist effort can be dangerous, because it can drive terrorist cells deeper underground, compromise sources, or expose vulnerabilities that terrorists can exploit. Counterterrorism operators must take all these factors into account as they sift through the mountains of reporting they confront every day.

Another example was the failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Union. Was this another intelligence failure? It is worth noting that the scholarly community was not predicting this either. In fact, some of the very same scholars who failed to predict it soon offered elegant analyses showing why it was inevitable. But it was not inevitable at all: if it had not been for Poland's successful defiance in the summer of 1989 – which may have been determined by a single vote in the Polish *Sejm* (parliament) – the revolutionary year of 1989 might never have happened, and the Soviet Union might be standing today.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote of a related phenomenon he called "illusions of retrospective determinism," whereby scholars, knowing how things turned out, go back to trace all the lines of causation that led history along its ineluctable course. In actuality, in trying to anticipate and predict events *before*

they occur, one is dealing with *probabilistic* outcomes, which have to be weighed against many other possible outcomes. Yet *after* an event has occurred, the probability of its occurring becomes 100%, and the probability of all other outcomes drops to zero.

To illustrate the point, I would challenge you to tell me now – not later – at what point the Saudi kingdom will fall or the North Korean regime collapse. I am pretty sure that both of those events will occur, but I cannot tell you when.

All this leads me to ask again: Why so many intelligence failures? Why is their frequency increasing? Is U.S. intelligence really that bad? Or could it be that there is something in the external reality that make predictions harder than critics may think, and something in our way of judging intelligence performance that sets the bar impossibly high? This is not to exonerate the intelligence agencies or exempt them from criticism, but rather to argue for a more rigorous and realistic set of criteria for assessing intelligence success and failure.

What, then, is a *reasonable standard* for judging intelligence performance? To begin with, such a standard should disaggregate "failure" to assess what specific errors (of commission or omission) might have been averted with a level of professional competence that could reasonably have been expected *at the time* (i.e., without benefit of hindsight). We should also be mindful that it is easier to identify broad trends than predict specific outcomes – which are contingent on so many factors, some of which may simply be beyond human capacity to foresee.

Clausewitz wrote that "many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain." But he was referring to tactical, wartime intelligence. Indeed, "fog of war" was his term. Clausewitz actually had a healthy respect for intelligence, but he had an equally healthy respect for the contingency of history – the element of chance and the interplay of possibilities.

This also bears on the warning function: the U.S. Intelligence Community can reasonably claim that it provided good *strategic* warning of the terrorist threat in the summer of 2001 – that a major terrorist attack on the homeland was coming and coming soon – but it did not provide specific *tactical* warning of exactly when, where, and how the attack would come. I leave it to you to debate whether that performance was good enough. Of course, nothing can be said to have been "good enough" when thousands of innocent people lost their lives. But was this a "massive intelligence failure," or was it instead an enormous tragedy that perhaps could not have been prevented by even the most dedicated public officials?

2. Strategic Analysis

That brings me to my second question: Why policy makers don't *want* strategic intelligence analysis. Let me offer five reasons:

1. On the whole, it is not very good; even when it is, it's seldom relevant.
2. The time horizons of policy makers and intelligence analysts are too divergent, especially with respect to national estimates.
3. Leaks of intelligence estimates compromise both analysis and policy.
4. Policy makers like to keep their options and discretion open.
5. Above all, policy makers don't like to have their pet projects subjected to critical scrutiny.

So it is perfectly understandable that policy makers do not want strategic analysis that might constrain them. But let me suggest why they need it anyway.

Of course policy makers and their planning staffs (usually) are smart people who (sometimes) think strategically, and they are (almost always) arrogant enough to think they can do strategic analysis better. A famous slogan of the legal profession is that anyone who attempts to defend himself in a court of law has a fool for a client. In that vein, I would suggest that a policy maker who does his own strategic intelligence has a fool for an analyst.

Policy needs to proceed from a realistic assessment of the relevant trends as they are, not as policy makers would wish them to be. To offer a recent example: the 2006 National Security Strategy was all policy, without any strategic intelligence, even though a very good and comprehensive piece of strategic analysis (the NIC 2020 report) was readily available.

Policy makers need to empower relatively independent strategic analysis, to include analysis that challenges the prevailing wisdom and party line. In our system, only the President can ensure this. The first President Bush did; the second President Bush did not. My sense of the Obama Administration is that despite the President's open and deliberative style, the administration is too suspicious of its own bureaucracy to empower the intelligence agencies this way.

There are other explanations for how and why strategic intelligence analysis has eroded in recent years. For one thing, the budget climate of the 1990s caused the Intelligence Community to cut strategic intelligence, turn analysts into generalists, and focus almost exclusively on current intelligence. And we had gone from an era in which a single overarching threat, which allowed us to focus our efforts, to

an era characterized by multiple lesser challenges – encouraging the drift away from strategic analysis. The Clinton administration's relative disinterest in intelligence did nothing to arrest these trends, and the Bush (43) administration's style was to discourage strategic analysis, which it didn't want, in favor of current intelligence which it used to support (rather than inform) policy preferences.

The neglect of strategic analysis has had severe consequences. Let me put it bluntly: the erosion of strategic analysis, and the willful misuse of intelligence, is directly related to the strategic blunders of the past few years. We would never have gotten into the disastrous occupation of Iraq had the administration heeded the intelligence analysis written before, during, and after the invasion. We would never have gotten ourselves into a self-defeating "war on terror" had the Bush administration been open to a serious strategic analysis of the challenge posed by international terrorism – analysis written by skilled Arabists who had lived and worked in Iraq. Finally, to make a more neutral point, the most notable thing about the aforementioned "NIC 2020" report, "Mapping the Global Future," is how different the agenda it suggests is from the agenda pursued by policymakers in Washington and elsewhere.

3. Reforming the Intelligence Reform

Let me turn now to my third question: how to reform the intelligence reforms of 2004-5. As I argued in Congressional testimony two and a half years ago, flawed analysis of the intelligence failures, real or alleged, of 9/11 and on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction led to flawed reform measures. These flawed approaches are related to what I call the "coordination myth" – the mistaken belief that it is somehow possible to "coordinate" the work of many thousands of people in nearly every country in the world. Yet in trying to respond to the tragedy of 9/11, it was all too tempting for politicians in both parties to latch on to the "quick fix" solution of creating an "intelligence czar."

Now that we are where we are, what should be done to reform these reforms? Let me offer five brief suggestions.

- First, restore the primacy of strategic intelligence – creating a better balance between strategic analysis and current intelligence.
- Second, fix the "demand" side of the problem. Reform so far has focused almost exclusively on the "supply" side – what the IC provides – without devoting sufficient attention to the "demand side" – the uses, misuses, and abuses of intelligence by the executive branch as well as the Congress.

- Third and more specifically, create an interagency strategic planning group so that planning is done jointly, with intelligence integral to the process. This would serve to discipline both policy and intelligence. It is always hard bureaucratically because agencies and departments jealously guard their planning prerogatives, but it would be a key first step toward strengthening the relationship between intelligence and policy.
- Fourth, affect a cultural revolution in the Intelligence Community. Instead of conceiving of intelligence as something done by a few highly secretive, specialized agencies, it should be thought of much more expansively. We need much greater openness and connectivity to expertise outside, aiming toward a flexible, virtual, and *global intelligence community*.
- Fifth, with regard to the warning function: either create a strategic warning committee worthy of the name or abolish it. As it is now, strategic warning is the sound of one hand clapping: the Intelligence Community warns, and nothing happens. At a minimum, a warning formally issued by the Intelligence Community should compel action, if only the convening of an emergency Deputies Committee meeting. This innovation would impose a useful discipline on both policy makers and the intelligence community.

Conclusion

Let me end there. But as you get back into the dramatic days of August 1968, I would remind you of the contingent nature of history, even for those closer to it than American officials were. Dubcek and Mlynar didn't see the invasion coming. They thought they had secured a vote of confidence from the Soviet leaders in the Bratislava meeting four days just before the invasion. Afterwards, Brezhnev and Company didn't expect the resistance they encountered after the arrest and detention of Dubcek and his allies. Soviet leaders had planned simply to install a collaborationist regime headed by Alois Indra; Instead, they had to countenance Dubcek's return and a period of so-called "normalization" until finally securing his ouster a year later. So if warning done on the U.S. side was less than perfect, you may take some comfort in the fact Czechoslovak and Soviet officials did no better.

Thank you! Good luck with the conference!