The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 10
Number 1 *Parameters 1980*

Article 9

7-4-1980

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES: LET'S MAKE THEM USEFUL

Richard K. Betts

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES:

LET'S MAKE THEM USEFUL

by

RICHARD K. BETTS

The US intelligence community has evolved into a vast conglomerate since World War II: the Central Intelligence Agency, with groups of analysts working with virtually every region and functional area of international relations; the Defense Intelligence Agency, which provides support to the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff; the National Security Agency, which collects and disseminates communications intercepts; the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the intelligence agencies of the separate services; and the intelligence components of the Treasury and Energy Departments.[1] The bulk of the combined effort, in terms of cost, goes into collecting raw information from open sources (such as the foreign press), photographic reconnaissance, communications monitoring, and clandestine sources (espionage). The ultimate product of this massive array, however, is finished analytic intelligence for the use of operational officials throughout the defense and foreign affairs bureaucracies. The finished product comes in various forms. Most numerous are "current" intelligence analyses. The basic job of the intelligence community is to digest information daily and pass unfamiliar facts immediately to policymakers so as to alert them to new developments or freshly emergent problems. The National Intelligence Daily, warning bulletins, and brief analytic memoranda are the products most relevant to this function. This kind of intelligence does what high-level officials like; it *simplifies* their jobs.

National Intelligence Estimates of Soviet strategic capabilities and objectives, on the other hand, are quite different from current intelligence reportage. NIEs are the collective result of contributions by analysts in various intelligence agencies, and they are normally produced annually. Drafting is coordinated by National Intelligence Officers under the aegis of the Director of Central Intelligence. The final estimate is discussed and debated in the National Foreign Intelligence Board, and dissents to the prevailing view are noted within the document.[2] The annual NIEs on Soviet strategic capabilities and objectives are, in principle, the most important intelligence documents used by high-level authorities. But because the issues in this area are so vital and controversial, the strategic estimates along with their appendices of supporting data grew longer and more detailed over time, so that by the end of the 1970's they had become book-length. The rare president who actually reads a lengthy NIE may be usefully educated about the fundamentals of the nuclear balance, Soviet programs, and the background of deterrence. But the primary audience for these estimates is the group of officials somewhat lower in the chain of command—the leaders of the State and Defense Departments, the National Security Council Staff, and senior officers of

the military services and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Since strategic nuclear matters are the central elements of the defense debate, these officials already know a lot about such matters and usually have strong opinions of their own.

For these people, an NIE that is a genuinely useful contribution to strategic decisionmaking—rather than just a compendium of numbers, conventional wisdom, or competing disagreements—will do what busy officials often do not like; it will *complicate* their jobs. That is, an effective estimate should not merely tell operational users what they already know or who disagrees with whom (these elements should be in the document, but as a basis, not the end product). Rather, an effective estimate should dig deeper, probe the factual bases of disagreement, highlight the critical uncertainties, raise questions that need more attention, and explore factors that impinge on the answers to such questions. If estimates are expected to be definitive, they will always be disappointing unless they restrict their conclusions to such a high level of generality that they are unenlightening.[3] Rather than demanding that they reveal truth, we might better judge estimates by how well they provoke more careful debate. In short, strategic estimates should lengthen the decisionmakers' agenda rather than shorten it, and should push them toward more extensive reflection rather than relieve them of the burden of interpretation.

These are tall orders, especially for a document that is supposed to incorporate the perspectives of numerous agencies—a process that sometimes encourages drafters to soften language and rub the sharp edges off controversial views. As long as an NIE is expected somehow to be definitive, there will be a natural tendency for participants in the estimating exercise to see it as a bureaucratic battle, and thus to jockey for position in an attempt to persuade. It may be unrealistic to expect any document negotiated among several government agencies to be as pointed, creative, and freewheeling as I have in mind. Indeed, many practitioners may feel such qualities to be antithetical to the role of intelligence, viewing such a proposal as the adventurous whimsy of a naive academic. Further, they can properly point out that NIEs have done quite well in many respects in fulfilling their purposes. At any rate, I will try to suggest a few of the ways in which the process might be improved. It would be useful first, however, to note some of the obstacles that stand in the way of solutions.

There are good reasons why estimates can never be perfect. If intelligence depended only on presenting facts, there would be no problem, except in improving the collection of evidence. Analysis of our adversaries' capabilities and intentions, however, can never avoid pitfalls because the facts—even "hard" facts about the number and quality of Soviet military forces—cannot speak for themselves. Ambiguity and ambivalence will always plague analysts. Otherwise, they would be producing a report, not an estimate.

Proper appreciation of strategic threats to the United States does not flow automatically from (1) what we know Soviet missiles can do to us, or (2) what we think Soviet leaders want to do to us. The first is so overwhelmingly awful that it makes the second the most critical question. But the second is impossible to approach without stipulating a scenario or set of conditions in which war might be considered a choice. The strategy adopted by the Soviet Politburo may or may not be governed by some global master plan, but even if it is that plan would tell us very little about the circumstances in which the Politburo might resort to a nuclear attack. And in any situation where that choice might arise, Soviet calculations will depend heavily on what we can do to them in retaliation. *Planners* must always worry more about Soviet capabilities than intentions, since the latter cannot be known with assurance and can change more rapidly than the former. *Intelligence estimators*, however, should strive to put enemy capabilities in context, so that planners with limited defense budgets can make the best choice of countermeasures. Moreover, the technological revolution in surveillance now makes intelligence on the Soviet force structure vastly easier to obtain and assess than it used

to be. We now know much more, with higher confidence, about the *technical* aspects of the Soviets' capabilities than we do about their force employment plans.

The foregoing facts suggest two problems, neither of which is insoluble, in the traditional norms governing the design of NIEs. One is the need to integrate treatment of intentions and capabilities more tightly than was done in the past, primarily through greater attention to the intervening variable of operational planning concepts and doctrine. Actual Soviet capabilities are more a function of "dynamic" calculations (assessments of nuclear exchanges with specific weapon systems matched against specific target sets) than of "static" tabulations of weapon inventories. In the professional debates over nuclear strategy that surround the estimating process, too much emphasis has usually been placed on elaborate computer simulations based on a narrow range of American assumptions of what Soviet targeting policy is sensible. These assumptions may or may not correspond to actual Soviet plans, but it would nonetheless be helpful for analyses to expand the range of possibilities considered.

The second problem, related to the first, is the constraint against including net assessments in such intelligence community studies as NIEs.[4] Net assessments are evaluations of military capabilities in which both sides' forces are compared to each other (rather than considered in isolation) in order to discern how adequate or deficient US weapons and personnel would be for the actual execution of their missions. In other words, the capabilities of Soviet bombers and intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles would be judged not in terms of the *absolute* quantity of nuclear megatonnage they could deliver against the United States, but in *relative* terms that take into account the quantity similar American systems could deliver against the USSR. The bar against inclusion of net assessments was designed to preserve the CIA's reputation for impartiality by keeping it from embroilment in the rancorous debates about US defense programs, budgets, and force effectiveness. Recently the strictures against the use of net assessment in the NIEs were reportedly relaxed, but military participants complained about the result (which struck them as inaccurate and overly optimistic) and dissented from the conclusions of the estimate.[5]

Full-blown strategic net assessments have traditionally been the preserve of the Defense Department or the interagency groups which prepare Presidential Review Memorandums. These Memorandums are prepared by the operational bureaus of the State and Defense Departments and the National Security Council staff, with intelligence community participation. In stark contrast with the NIE, the Presidential Review Memorandum combines in a single document both empirically based intelligence estimates and a series of policy options for the president's consideration. Traditionally, as we have seen, pure intelligence estimates are supposed to be divorced from debate over policy. In reality, however, it is difficult to

---

Dr. Richard K. Betts is a Research Associate in Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. He received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University, where he served on the faculty in 1975-76 before joining Brookings. A former staff member of the National Security Council and of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Dr. Betts teaches graduate courses on defense policy at Columbia University and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. His first book, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (1977), won the Harold D. Lasswell Award for the best book on civil-military relations in 1977-78. At Brookings he has coauthored *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979), which won the 1980 Woodrow Wilson Prize for the best book in political science, and *Nonproliferation and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1980). He has completed a forthcoming Brookings book on surprise attacks and US defense planning, and is editing a study on the strategic implications of cruise missile development. Dr. Betts has also published articles in *World Politics, Orbis, Foreign Policy, International Security, Asian Survey, The Washington Quarterly*, and elsewhere. The present article is based on the author's statement before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, delivered on 20 February 1980.

---

have an estimate that proves relevant and useful to a top policymaker without analysis that is tinged to some degree with implications for policy. I do not argue that intelligence estimators should jump into the fray of decisionmaking. But on difficult problems where the border between pure analysis and policy conclusions is indistinct, they should be allowed to tiptoe near the line, lest their estimates become so bland and reticent as to be unhelpful.[6] Net assessment comparisons lie in this sort of gray area; they are much more the heart of threat assessment than are evaluations of Soviet capabilities in a vacuum. If intelligence analysts are not given a license to factor US forces and policies fully into estimates, then we should abandon the fiction that the NIE is the most important product of the intelligence community, and reorient the CIA's priorities toward its contributions to Presidential Review Memorandums, which do conjoin estimates with policy options.

Another stumbling block in the path of effective NIEs, unconnected with the ground rules governing their preparation, is the dual isolation of analysts. One form of isolation ensues from the cloistered environment of the CIA. Unlike some Foreign Service or military officers who can gain wide experience by serving staff tours in other agencies—such as the CIA itself, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, National Security Council, Office of the Secretary of Defense, or State's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs—CIA analysts have few opportunities to rotate on "policy tours" outside the intelligence community. This fact probably presents a greater problem in regard to political intelligence than strategic, and it does not prevent analysts, like university researchers, from doing excellent work. But occasional leavening exposure to the world of intelligence *consumers* could help to sensitize analysts to what their customers want and the problems they face, and enhance the analyst's ability to communicate effectively what those customers need to consider.

The second aspect of isolation is the one-way flow of intelligence traffic from producers to policymakers. Too seldom do top officials share with professional analysts the results of trips and high-level exchanges with foreign leaders. Sometimes this is because of secretive jealousy about information or distrust of the intelligence bureaucracy's discretion in diffusing sensitive data. Ray Cline has pointed out how this tendency was a particular problem with Secretary of State Kissinger and President Nixon.[7] Often, of course, the idea of reporting downward simply does not occur to cabinet-level authorities. One member of the intelligence community told me something I cannot confirm, but will repeat. After Secretary of Defense Brown's trip to China—at a time of extreme US-Soviet tension and Russian suspicions of a developing Washington-Peking axis—he made no effort to brief relevant personnel in the CIA. How can a comprehensive strategic estimate of the prospective East-West balance and the USSR's operational objectives approach accuracy without some informed consideration of the policy options being entertained by our own leaders?

The obstacle that may be hardest to overcome is that of producing a trenchant NIE—one that avoids responding to sharp criticisms by turning into bland, inconclusive mush—on subjects bedeviled by strong contending beliefs and emotional commitments. There is nothing unnatural or pernicious about the fact that matters with implications for national survival and expenditures of billions of dollars provoke vigorous infighting. In recent years the battle lines were drawn more and more starkly, as SALT negotiations focused debate on the nature of the nuclear balance, the definition and significance of parity and superiority, and the aims behind the steady expansion of Soviet strategic power.

NIEs should not be expected either to settle or to sidestep this debate. They cannot settle it because the complex imponderables are too numerous to allow analysis to resolve the uncertainties of moderate observers or transcend the near-religious fundamentalism underlying convictions at the hawkish and dovish extremes. On the other hand, they cannot sidestep the debate because any such

estimates would probably not amount to more than honest and evenhanded listings of views and uncertainties. NIEs that do compile disparate interpretations without attempting to resolve them may be solid documents, but they do not really offer policymakers much more than they can get from reading the *Annual Report* of the Secretary of Defense and a good selection of open-literature articles by Paul Nitze, Albert Wohlstetter, Richard Pipes, Paul Warnke, Jan Lodal, Raymond Garthoff, and other astute commentators of differing persuasions.

To get beyond the groundwork function, analysis should give special emphasis to the blind spots or soft elements in data and to the methodological leaps of faith that underlie assertions about technical capabilities or strategic objectives. Beyond alerting consumers to which links are weakest in the chains of logic behind assessments of the Soviet threat, the estimate should try to outline the structure of interdependencies between different variables that will determine alternative Soviet programs or leadership decisions in crisis. This outline would require a complex set of "If . . . then . . . " hypotheses and propositions.

The foregoing proposal may sound ethereal, as if I have lost sight of what a bureaucratized estimating process can produce and what practical men in high policy positions will take seriously. *But there is no way to substitute "practical" analysis for theoretical speculation on many questions of nuclear war, because all we have is theory.* Happily we have no experience to serve as a guide. Estimators may not find it easy to do what I suggest, but if they do not even try, thinking they should stay down to earth, they will wind up using unacknowledged theories masquerading as hard data.

To make progress toward informed speculation that gets beyond the public debate within the defense community—which has unfortunately been mired in statistical gamesmanship and marginally new variations on arguments about deterrence and damage limitation that first arose well over 20 years ago—estimates must ask a wide range of questions. And if they cannot answer all those questions, they can at least suggest which ones bear on interpreting the significance of known facts, so that decisionmakers know what new indicators to look for. Several examples of such questions follow in the paragraphs below.

Much of the essential information about Soviet weapons in inventory or in development is known, but some pieces of the puzzle are less firmly in place than others. How solid or flimsy is the basis for estimates of Soviet ICBM accuracy and reliability? What evidence would be necessary to invalidate or increase confidence in these conclusions?

A principal issue in the evolution of strategic debate over the last several years has been the alleged Soviet quest for a nuclear counterforce "war-winning" capability. Thus analysis should address the data in terms of whether the USSR's ICBM developments could plausibly be motivated by a different goal, as well as whether these developments do in fact provide the capabilities for the most threatening possibility. More specific questions arise. How many different targeting plans or operational concepts could be logically consistent with the Soviet force structure? How much if anything about Soviet strategy can be inferred from deployments? Conversely, what strategies if any are precluded by observable force developments? Does the pattern of growth in Soviet forces necessarily suggest a coherent strategy at the political level? Is it inconsistent with a pattern that would follow from a less centrally premeditated force buildup—that is, a force resulting simply from what design bureaus and the Strategic Rocket Forces would produce and deploy if they were regularly assured a constant share of national resources and were permitted to decide what to spend it on? An explanation of Soviet weapons programs in terms of "bureaucratic politics" might argue that the awesome growth of Soviet forces is simply the cumulative result of leadership decisions to allocate a given percentage of GNP to strategic forces (the rise in Russian defense expenditures over the past two decades has

indeed been significant, but it has been quite *steady*), and that it is not driven by a real Politburo expectation of achieving a first-strike capability.

Even if true, the foregoing explanation of Soviet weapons proliferation is not reassuring, since we must deal with the result irrespective of the motives behind it, but actual ambiguities in the inferences that can be drawn from hard data should be highlighted, not buried in assertions that are really just educated guesses. Thus, even if the Soviet force structure and program patterns could be consistent with a relatively benign (mildly threatening) explanation of Soviet motives, analysts must also ask whether they are inconsistent with actions of a malevolent but crafty Soviet leadership. If there are divisions of opinion about the "thinkability" of nuclear war within the Soviet Union, or conflicting indicators in different writings by military officers or civilian analysts, which schools of thought lack genuine influence, and which elements are likely to be represented in the room where a decision for or against attack would be made? For example, beginning in the late 1970's and continuing to the present, much of the US debate over nuclear strategy has been a dialogue of the deaf because both hawks and doves could cite different writings in Soviet journals to substantiate contradictory views about the nature of Soviet strategic doctrine. Richard Pipes and Raymond Garthoff, ironically, agree that much more attention should be paid to what the Soviets actually say about their doctrine, but then disagree markedly about the principal content of those declarations.[8] Pipes sees Soviet writings as rejecting the strategy of mutual assured destruction, while Garthoff sees them as more receptive to it. This is because different Soviet articles support either case, depending on which clauses the reader chooses to emphasize.

Probably the answers to all of these questions are indeterminate, and most possibilities are left open, but the very process of explicitly dealing with such questions is bound to focus attention more forcefully on the critical uncertainties. NIEs do make some noteworthy efforts to deal with such questions, but they rarely push the analysis far enough—for quite understandable reasons. The National Foreign Intelligence Board could never agree on much if speculation went that far. Recognizing this, I will close with two final suggestions.

First, the more extensive and creative sort of NIE I have in mind would probably have to sacrifice concision and full coordination of agency views. A collection of contending analyses—rather than a thoroughly negotiated and integrated treatment—might be appended to an exposition of basic technical data along with a good executive summary. This format would put a higher premium on the neglected art of the executive summary. Many leaders at the top of the government never read beyond this summary. But most such summaries are not as useful as they could be, precisely because they *do* try to summarize—that is, they try to touch the surface of all the elements in the document. In many cases the semi-expert reader already knows everything that can be conveyed at this level of generality. What he needs is a *selective* summary that highlights what details or arguments are especially new or problematic, with a cross-reference to the body of the NIE where those points are elaborated.

Second, the previously discussed problems, obstacles, and solutions touching the estimating system are primarily conceptual in nature, involving process, rather than organizational, involving the structure of the intelligence community. The traditional approach to improving intelligence production, however, has been to reorganize. Reorganization, while it may help, never seems to really "work" as a basic solution, because it never lasts very long—it is usually followed by other structural adjustments in continuing attempts to solve problems that are essentially intellectual and philosophical by shifting boxes and arrows around on the organization charts.

From the mid-1960's to mid-1970's, the executive branch commissioned a half-dozen studies on intelligence reorganization. Nixon reorganized the system in 1971, Ford did so

again in 1976, and Carter did so yet again less than two years later. Organizational problems since then may lead to yet another major shuffle. Yet, I have never heard anyone draw a direct link between past reorganizational steps and the resulting quality of NIEs. The abolition of the Office of National Estimates and its replacement by the National Intelligence Officer system in 1973 was a major shift, but did it measurably change the NIEs? For example, the panel of outside experts commissioned to produce an alternate strategic estimate in 1976—the so-called Team B—was critical of those estimates that both preceded and followed the replacement of the Office of National Estimates by the National Intelligence Officer system.[9]

Reorganization can improve intelligence production at the margins, perhaps, but it will not create breakthroughs. True breakthroughs may not even be feasible. But more progress is likely toward that end if managers and consumers of intelligence products give analysts a more demanding agenda and a freer rein. These steps would entail a mandate to address a wider range of controversial and complex questions about the links between Soviet doctrine and plans, on one hand, and actual force deployments, on the other; and they would require a higher degree of institutional tolerance for individual speculation.

NOTES

1. For the best unclassified descriptions and analyses of the history, roles, and functions of the intelligence community, see US Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities, *Final Report*, Book I: *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, and Book IV: *Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Foreign and Military Intelligence*, 94th Cong., 2d Sess., 1976; US Congress, House, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Hearings, U.S. Intelligence Agencies and Activities*, Part 2: *The Performance of the Intelligence Community*, and Part 5: *Risks and Control of Foreign Intelligence*, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., 1975; and Tyrus G. Fain, et al., eds., *The Intelligence Community: History, Organization, and Issues* (New York: Bowker, 1977).

2. In the 1950's and 1960's, coordination was performed by the Office of National Estimates, which had a staff ranging in number between 50 and 100. In 1973, this office was replaced by the National Intelligence Officer system. Problems in organization and staffing eventually led to the recent institution of the National Intelligence Council, in a form reminiscent of the Office of National Estimates, to oversee the estimative process.

3. For arguments about why inherent intellectual dilemmas limit the perfectibility of estimates, see Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics*, 31 (October 1978), 67-71, 83-84.

4. See Lawrence Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (Boulder: Westview, 1977), p. 41; and US Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Hearings, Nomination of Admiral Stansfield Turner*, 95th Cong., 1st Sess., 1977, pp. 76-77.

5. Michael Getler, "Soviets' Power Sparks Intelligence Rift," *The Washington Post*, 9 May 1980, pp. A1, A18.

6. See Richard K. Betts, "Intelligence for Policy-making," *Washington Quarterly*, 3 (Summer 1980), 119-21, 124-26.

7. Ray S. Cline, "Policy Without Intelligence," *Foreign Policy*, No. 17 (Winter 1974-75), 123-24.

8. See Pipes's and Garthoff's testimony in US Congress, House, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Hearings, Soviet Strategic Forces*, 96th Cong., 2d Sess., 1980, pp. 2-34; also Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, 64 (July 1977), 21-34, and Raymond Garthoff, "Mutual Deterrence and Strategic Arms Limitation in Soviet Policy," *International Security*, 3 (Summer 1978), 112-47. For a more recent treatment of this subject, see Anthony Austin, "Moscow Expert Says U.S. Errs on Soviet War Aims," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1980, p. A2.

9. Team B, headed by Richard Pipes and composed of several prestigious "hard-liners" concerned about Soviet intentions, produced a much sterner estimate than did Team A, composed of the CIA analysts charged with preparing the official NIE. The differences and the Team B recommendations are addressed briefly in Phillip A. Peterson, "American Perceptions of Soviet Military Power," *Parameters*, 7 (No. 4, 1977), 72-74; and at length in US Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report, The National Intelligence Estimates A-B Team Episode Concerning Soviet Strategic Capability and Objectives*, 95th Cong., 2d Sess., 1978.