Speaking Truth to Trump: The Crisis between the President and the American Intelligence Community

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President Trump's relations with the American intelligence community reflect a deep crisis in the relations between intelligence agencies and decision makers, which are complex in any case. An analysis of the crisis reveals a complicated picture. Trump's criticism is partly justified, and indeed speaks to fundamental problems afflicting the intelligence organizations in the United States. It appears, however, that underlying the crisis is Trump's more basic and disturbing concept of the role that the mechanisms and bodies for understanding reality should play in the decision making process. In effect, Trump vehemently undermines two of the basic fundamentals of intelligence work: the emphasis on expertise, experience, and adoption of methods designed to limit errors and ensure the most professional and neutral analysis of reality possible; and the importance of data and information ("the facts") in the intelligence process. Even though relations between intelligence agencies and decision makers in Israel are different from those in the United States, the American case constitutes a warning sign to the intelligence community in Israel.

Introduction

On February 28, 2020, President Donald Trump announced his intention to appoint Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-Tex) as director of national intelligence (DNI). Trump first sought to appoint Ratcliffe, who is among the President's staunchest supporters, to the position in July 2019, but withdrew the name anticipating that the nomination would not be approved by the Senate – in part given reports that Ratcliffe had misrepresented his role in prosecuting terrorism cases, and given claims that his appointment to the highest post in the American intelligence community (and as a member of the National Security Council and the cabinet) was intended to enhance the political influence on the intelligence community. The announcement allows Richard Grenell, US ambassador to Germany who was appointed ten days earlier as acting DNI, to continue his role while Ratcliffe's appointment is debated in Senate hearings. Grenell too is a strong Trump supporter, and both he and Ratcliffe have attacked the assessments by the intelligence community regarding Russian involvement in the 2016 elections.

The United States has previously seen politicians loyal to the president appointed as heads of intelligence agencies, but Trump's conduct vis-à-vis the American intelligence community reflects the deep crisis in relations between the intelligence community and the institution of the presidency since the outset of Trump's term. In January 2017, following leaks from the investigation of Russian involvement in the presidential elections, Trump alleged that the conduct of American intelligence was the same as in Nazi Germany. In May 2017, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, and in May 2018, claimed that he was the victim of illegal surveillance by the intelligence organizations. In August 2018, he revoked the security clearance of former CIA director John Brennan, who had criticized the President. In January 2019, after the annual presentation of the Worldwide Threat Assessment in Congress, Trump tweeted, "The Intelligence people seem to be extremely passive and naïve," and suggested, "Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school!" In May 2019, Attorney General William Barr began an investigation into the legality of the intelligence organizations' actions during the investigation of Russian involvement in the elections. In July 2019, Trump fired DNI Daniel Coats.

Trump's conduct is perceived as part of a broader struggle that he and other current leaders around the world are waging against institutions that have been regarded for years as responsible for clarifying and understanding reality by means of a professional analysis based on facts: the court and law enforcement systems, academia, and in some contexts, the media as well. As seen by Trump and his supporters, these institutions are controlled by the "deep state" – a "shadow government" of elites forcing their views and values on the elected political leadership. Trump and his supporters regard the intelligence agencies in the United States, especially with respect to the investigation into Russian involvement in the elections and the impeachment process in Congress, as full partners in the effort to remove him from office, together with representatives of the Democratic Party and the media.

At the same time, a series of former leading intelligence figures (mainly from the period of the Obama administration) have figured among Trump's biggest critics in the past four years. They and other opponents of the President are vocal critics of his personality, capabilities, policy, and fitness to be president. In this context, they also portray his conduct as that of an intelligence consumer who lacks knowledge of the issues pertaining to national security; has no interest in increasing his knowledge; systematically ignores information that contradicts his aims and policy; dismisses and contradicts assessments and facts inconsistent with the narrative that he seeks to promote; relies on biased and erroneous sources of information; acts hastily in a way that jeopardizes sensitive sources; prevents disclosure of information to Congress; and reportedly deliberately gives priority to intelligence resources and operations aligned with his political agenda.

This article analyzes the crisis in relations between Trump and the American intelligence community, and addresses the following points:

    a. Trump's allegations against the intelligence community
    b. The degree to which this crisis is unprecedented and exceptional, in comparison to relations between intelligence agencies and previous US presidents
    c. Whether there are objective grounds for Trump's allegations
    d. Trump's perception of intelligence principles, and what accounts for it
    e. How the crisis actually affects intelligence and decision making processes in the US in the field of national security.

Trump's Allegations

A large part of the crisis between Trump and the intelligence organizations concerns disagreement about facts and assessments. The most prominent example of a dispute of this type is the intelligence assessment of Russian involvement, and particularly by President Putin, in the 2016 elections. Trump refuses to accept the intelligence assessment on this matter, belittles its importance, and prefers contradicting assessments. As the 2020 elections grow nearer, the tension around this issue seems to aggravate further the relations between Trump and the intelligence organizations. Congress was already informed in mid-February of the intelligence assessment that Russia is again acting in support of Trump's reelection, an event that has reportedly aroused Trump's anger, and led him to replace DNI Joseph Maguire with Trump loyalist Grenell. One of Grenell's first actions after his appointment was reportedly a request to re-evaluate the information underlying the assessment of the expected Russian involvement.

There are other examples of Trump taking issue with facts and assessments. Several times he dissented with intelligence assessments about the future of North Korea's nuclear program and its compliance with agreements with the United States. Following the murder of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi, despite a CIA report on the matter, the President denied the existence of well-founded intelligence pointing to the involvement of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the murder. In January 2019, he attacked the intelligence assessment that the Islamic State (ISIS) will continue to constitute a global threat, despite the extensive losses it had suffered.

In other cases, Trump's assertions against the intelligence organizations did not address the facts or the intelligence assessments themselves, but rather the way that they were presented by intelligence personnel and reported in the media. A prominent example was the annual Worldwide Threat Assessment prepared by the heads of the intelligence organizations, which, Trump claimed, included an incorrect assessment about Iran. The argument in this case was not about the facts themselves, because the heads of the intelligence organizations specified that while Tehran was not violating the nuclear

agreement (at that time), Iran continued its missile activity and regional aggression. Trump's criticism was directed more against the impression created by the intelligence briefing and the way it was covered by the media than what was said in the discussion itself.

Another element of dispute concerns Trump's criticism of the intelligence organizations' basic patterns of activity and what they produce. Trump frequently criticizes what he portrays as their old-fashioned actions and repeated failures (for example, the September 11 terrorist attacks and the erroneous assessments of nonconventional weapons in Iraq in 2003). When he assumed office, he openly declared that he would not need the daily intelligence briefing that had been one of the most important aspects of the relations between the intelligence agencies and presidents in the United States, saying, "You know, I'm, like, a smart person… I don't have to be told the same thing in the same words every single day." In other cases, Trump accused the intelligence organizations of politicization, breach of regulations (as was confirmed in a report by the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General), and even illegal activities in order to damage his image.

Trump's Justified Criticism
An analysis of the dispute shows that some of Trump's criticism is justified, and refers to known fundamental problems existing in the American intelligence community and other intelligence communities: methodological and organizational gaps causing errors in assessments and outdated work processes that have not been adapted to the changes of the information era. Trump also correctly points to the limitations of a conventional and questionable intelligence approach typical of parts of the American intelligence community, as reflected in the arguments of his critics. In its extreme form, this approach regards intelligence personnel as educators of the decision makers and aims at attaining a monopoly on understanding reality concerning the enemy and the surroundings. Several recent books by former leading intelligence community figures show that this attitude still has a strong grip among the intelligence organizations in the United States.

In his criticism, Trump challenges the American intelligence community and intelligence methodology in general. Facts, professional expertise, and analytical analysis clearly play a key role, but what he sees as arrogance in aiming to use them to educate the decision makers is unsuitable for the characteristics of the period (and was also inappropriate in the past). Intelligence knowledge is always incomplete, fragile, temporary, and dependent on a long list of factors. It is often no more than a system of hypotheses that require testing. In other cases, decision makers need to understand possible directions of development, not information. Trump's skepticism in some of these matters is therefore plausible, and may also lead to a reassessment of old intelligence conceptions.

Trump also highlights aspects that are even less comfortable for the intelligence community when he asserts that the intelligence organizations conducted illegal surveillance of his campaign, and leaked sensitive information. These allegations are still under investigation by the Department of Justice Office of Inspector General, which is examining the intelligence community's actions in the 2016 elections.

There are also, of course, completely legitimate disputes between Trump and the intelligence community as well as others in the political and military establishment about policy that derives from the assessment drawn by the intelligence organizations. The retired heads of the intelligence organizations frequently criticize Trump's foreign policy, and it appears that this criticism also reflects the current mood in the intelligence organizations and the views of some of their current officeholders. The large number of resignations and firings of leading officeholders (including in the intelligence community itself) are indicative of Trump's confrontations and disputes with leaders of the political-defense establishment.

What is New? Trump's Questioning of the Role of Professional Analysis in the Decision Making Process
Relations between intelligence agencies and decision makers in liberal Western democracies are by nature difficult, and have fluctuated over the years. In the past, many decision makers have also criticized the work of intelligence, following their disagreement with particular assessments or unsuccessful assesments. Most of these decision makers have nevertheless realized the need for professional agencies for understanding reality, based on expertise, experience, and methodology, while relying first and foremost on facts. The way Trump uses intelligence for foreign policy, and political and personal purposes is indeed dubious, but is not completely new. Previous American administrations and other political groups also misused intelligence for their purposes, for example, in the case of nonconventional weapons in Iraq in 2003.

There is no dispute about the right of decision makers in the political leadership to reject intelligence assessments. Nevertheless, it appears that underlying the crisis between Trump and the intelligence community is a deeper matter involving Trump's style, and even more, his basic concept of the role of mechanisms for understanding reality in the decision making process. In the intelligence context, Trump publicly and vocally undermines two basic fundamentals of intelligence work: the emphasis on professional expertise, experience, and the use of systematic work methods designed to reduce errors and ensure a maximally neutral analysis of the situation; and the importance of data and information ("the facts") in the intelligence process. In several cases, Trump's arguments are not part of a legitimate argument about the content of the strategic intelligence

assessment; they are an all-encompassing denial of its legitimacy and that of those involved in formulating that assessment.

Trump's attitude is probably due to a number of factors:
    a. A different approach to the substance of intelligence, which regards it as a tool for shaping reality and influencing it, rather than a "neutral" mechanism for understanding it.
    b. An assertion that the current intelligence personnel are influenced by erroneous and biased political and ideological concepts rooted in the intelligence community, which greatly affect their work.
    c. Deeply-rooted disdain for the professional aspects of the American intelligence community, with an emphasis on many years of repeated errors, and appeals to other sources of information and knowledge, which he regards as more reliable.
    d. A possible basic attitude that there is no one truth and that every opinion can be relevant, and the idea that discerning reality is a result of power struggles (for example, the fabricated number of the people present at Trump's inauguration is becoming the White House's official version of the truth).

In addition, Trump's view of intelligence is unquestionably also affected by his political and legal situation. Here too, the most prominent example is his attitude toward the issue of Russian involvement in the 2016 elections. Trump regards the definitive intelligence conclusions that Russia intervened extensively and intentionally on behalf of his election as detracting substantially from his legitimacy as an elected president. He therefore disputes those conclusions, while deliberately distorting the clear facts in this matter.

Trump is accordingly confronting the American intelligence community with a different, unfamiliar, and incomprehensible model of its primary intelligence consumer. The intelligence tradition is based on the idea that professional analysis based on the facts is the main tool for discerning and understanding a complex reality. The American intelligence community uses the slogan "speak truth to power" to emphasize the need to present the intelligence output in all of its complexity, without bias, even if it is uncomfortable and contradicts the political interests of the decision makers and the policy they want to pursue. This basic concept, which distinguishes between intelligence and policy (despite the profound link between them), is unacceptable to Trump, who takes a utilitarian attitude toward the facts and the clarification of reality. As described by former advisor Steve Bannon, Trump "reads to reinforce" his views, not in order to learn. In other cases, he distorts the facts so that they will correspond to his policy.

Intelligence, with its characteristics as we know them today, developed in a broader liberal tradition. This tradition valued experience and expertise. The focus was on the

facts, with an emphasis on mechanisms for doubt and argument, and complexity was addressed with modesty. The need for constant study was recognized, and the free market of ideas was respected. The question now arises of how intelligence can function in an environment in which the leading decision maker undermines the basic foundations of intelligence work.

Conclusion

The crisis in relations between Trump and the American intelligence community thus reflects a head-on collision between two different concepts of reality. One regards reality as concrete, discernible, and understood, while the other regards it as a playing field for the exercise of power. Both of these concepts are viable, but the combination of the two makes it very difficult to clarify and understand reality. This collision is not new, but Trump has made what formerly took place far from the public spotlight, or after intelligence people left the room, common knowledge among the public.

It is difficult, of course, to analyze the ramifications of the crisis concerning the actual function of the intelligence community and the quality of the decision making processes in national security affairs. The reports in this matter are very biased because of political polarization, and it is doubtful whether the present provides a proper perspective for discussing this question. Even Trump's justified decision to kill Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds force, which also probably reflected Trump's sober and correct view of the complex situation, was greatly criticized by his opponents.

At the same time, in other matters it appears that Trump's unwillingness to accept the facts as they are emerges as one of the factors keeping him from taking action against certain existing and emerging threats. In other cases, his reluctance to take action causes him to deny the facts and disavow the professional analysis based on them. In any case, the enemies of the United States, such as Iran and Russia, are trying to take advantage of the declining trust in the intelligence community to arouse doubt among the public, the President, and foreign partners about the community's conclusions and work methods. There also seems to be evidence that as a result of Trump's reliance on unreliable sources of information, spin and disinformation has deeply penetrated decision making corridors and influenced decisions on national security matters.

This crisis also affects the American intelligence community, which is on the horns of a dilemma between its wish to preserve its position of influence and the need to adhere to its professional principles. In some matters, such as the assessment in so sensitive a matter as possible Russian involvement in the 2020 elections, the intelligence community has clung to its professional opinions. Nevertheless, there is evidence of avoiding friction with Trump in some matters. Furthermore, there is a clear retreat from the policy of

relative transparency characteristic of the preceding administration of Barack Obama. Leading intelligence officials almost completely avoid public appearances that are not required by law. It was also reported that leading members of the intelligence community sought to cancel part of the worldwide threat assessment in the Senate that is open to the media and the public, probably because of the lessons learned from Trump's tweets following last year's briefing.

The difficulty in clarifying reality, understanding it, and making correct decisions in national security affairs has always existed. It has resulted in notorious major failures, including by Israeli intelligence. Relations between the intelligence agencies and decision makers in Israel differ from those in the United States, and the Israeli intelligence community is also free of some of the problems that have long been typical for its counterpart in the United States (which were aggravated by the defensive attitude that followed the failures of the beginning of the millennium). Nevertheless, in many respects, Trump exemplifies a period in which intelligence agencies face not only the uncertainty inherent in a dynamic situation, but also a host of new problems. The spirit of this period is not restricted to the United States. The difficulty in understanding reality is clear today in many places, and the status of the truth is also undermined in Israel. The American case therefore constitutes a warning sign to the intelligence community in Israel, and to anyone who believes that clarifying and understanding reality is an important element in designing policy and making decisions in national security affairs.

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