Review - Revisiting Intelligence and Policy

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Revisiting Intelligence and Policy: Problems with Politicization and Receptivity
Edited by: Stephen Marrin
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Due to the secretive nature of the topic, intelligence is among the more complicated areas to write about with academic rigour. Spy novels and James Bond-like thrillers aside, it is hard for many of us to imagine how the intelligence community really functions, and articles by former practitioners can present starkly different pictures from the ones published by academics or journalists. In the edited volume *Revisiting Intelligence and Policy: Problems with Politicization and Receptivity*, Stephen Marrin brings together five contributions by both former practitioners and life-long academics to review the relationship between intelligence officers and policy-makers, focusing in particular on the question of 'politicisation' of intelligence: what is the role of intelligence in the policy-making process and how should intelligence officers use and present their materials to policy-makers? Marrin's volume, which was previously published as a special issue of the journal *Intelligence and National Security,* presents an eclectic selection of views.

After a short introduction by Marrin, in which he broadly outlines the arguments that will be put forward by the contributors, the first piece is by Glenn Hastedt, who discusses politicisation in a neutral sense. He argues that in principle, politicisation is neither good nor bad and that the instrument as such is neutral. Rather, it is in the application by intelligence officers that it gets a meaning and that it can equally well be used to, for example, propel or obstruct change that could be pursued by policy-makers (p. 7). He distinguishes between soft (using non-coercive means) and hard (using coercive means) politicisation, which can be exercised in the 'closed' bureaucratic setting (consisting almost entirely of intelligence officials, thus being almost completely closed off to outward influence); the elite setting (where key governmental and media figures also play a role); and the mass public setting (where public opinion can act as a 'referee' for intelligence and decision-making) (p. 10-11). He then goes on to list a number of examples where politicisation has been used in recent times, ranging from the 1950s Bomber Gap up and until the Iraq War. Whilst Hastedt does an excellent job at describing the different bureaucratic elements and their effects on thinking in domestic and foreign policy, he is found lacking in spelling out the implications this had for action in these areas. Moreover, his verdicts are not always consistent: he judges the Iraq War intelligence to be strongly flawed, but does not pass any verdict about Team B, a group of analysts that dissented from the mainstream CIA opinion about Soviet capabilities in the mid-1970s but that were arguably as wrong in their predictions and assumptions as the case of Iraq War intelligence.

Marrin's own piece argues why politicisation is not per definition a bad thing. He attempts to re-define politicisation, arguing that the concept has often been applied too liberally and stating that politicisation as it is often condemned in the literature (where it is referred to as unwarranted action by intelligence officers that seek to convince rather than inform policy-makers) is not much different from regular policy-making. Both are about cherry-picking evidence that supports an argument that you then wish to 'sell', Marrin argues. His line of reasoning does deserve some thought, but could have been condensed in a quarter of the words he devotes to it. Self-repeating, full of rhetorical questions that he already answered three pages before and side-paragraphs that do not add to his central argument, Marrin's piece is, ironically, by far the weakest of the entire volume.

The third article by Joshua Rovner argues against politicisation not because it is inherently bad, but rather because it

does not achieve its goals. Drawing on examples ranging from the Cuban Missile Crisis to 9/11, Rovner describes the tendency of intelligence officers to seek to 'repair' the image of the intelligence services in the wake of a failure. Thus, after the inability of the services to predict the terrorist attacks in September 2001, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet tried to 'package intelligence' to suit the White House's needs after it became clear that the Bush administration was set on invading Iraq in 2003, thereby restoring the image of the services in the eyes of the White House and, hopefully by extension, of the public (p. 60). However, Tenet only further decreased the trust in the services: once his actions became public after the Iraq War, the public started to blame the services for not being independent enough. Thus, whilst the intelligence sector tried to recover from a setback (9/11), its actions to achieve that only led to a second setback (the post-Iraq War discussions) and thus to further deterioration of the services' image. Politicisation in this sense, where intelligence tries to accommodate the executive in order to regain reputation and restore the function of the services in the long run, are thus prone to backfiring. Well-written, Rovner presents the best-argued and most counter-intuitive (thus thought-provoking) argument of the five contributors.

Erik J. Dahl, in the fourth article, addresses the issue of receptivity: 'the willingness and readiness to act on the warnings from intelligence' (p. 69), aptly summarised in the oft-heard question "why won't they listen?" As Dahl points out, whilst politicisation might often be seen as an aspect of the intelligence community and its officers, the policy-makers themselves can just as often be held accountable to the failing of the proper functioning of intelligence. He illustrates this with case studies from Pearl Harbour and the Battle at Midway, arguing that the former was an intelligence failure mostly because the possibility of a Japanese attack was not taken seriously and because the military and policy leaders did not trust the intelligence services enough to heed their warning (p. 78). The implication, Dahl argues, is that a genuine feeling of threat, as well as trust in intelligence, are crucial for intelligence to be successful. What he fails to take into account, however, are the alternative explanations for the failure at Pearl Harbor, such as a lack of centralisation in the intelligence community and the widespread assumption that the intelligence services would be capable of detecting any attack, as Gordon W. Prange has argued in his *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (1991). Analysed in this way, one can argue that it is not so much the feeling of threat or trust in intelligence, but rather the strength of links between intelligence officers and policy-makers that determine the extent to which intelligence can be used successfully.

The last contribution, by Nathan Woodard, is on the function of rhetoric and ethics in the intelligence business and politicisation, in which he argues that positive politicisation (in which a specific argument is brought forward particularly strongly) can at times be useful and good. Woodard states that as all language is inherently value-laden and that as intelligence is language, it too is laden with values. Thus, he argues, intelligence analysts should explicitly state their values and 'biases', making intelligence more objective and thus making it easier for policy-makers to make a decision on the basis of the 'objective' evidence they are provided with. Accepting for a moment the assumptions of this line of reasoning, many of which are contestable, one is left to wonder how such a system would work out in practice. How are intelligence analysts to determine and describe their own biases? Would this not invite a counter-bias situation, in which analysts are becoming 'too' aware of their biases and thus overcompensate? Woodard fails to address such questions.

Most of the pieces of Marrin's volume, then, do not leave the reader satisfied and overall, the book fails to effectively 'challenge conventional wisdom and [offer] new ways of thinking', as the preface states. Certainly, some of the arguments – in particular that of Rovner – are indeed thought-provoking and present the reader with an interesting perspective. However, *Revisiting Intelligence and Policy* consists for a large part of observations that can be deduced with a combination of common sense and subject-knowledge, whereby the former is more important than the latter. The variety of views strongly invite a concluding chapter to highlight the differences of the various approaches and better explain how the debates were played out in the book, but the absence of such means that the volume feels somewhat disjointed.

As it stands, the edited volume provides an overview of potentially interesting arguments. However most do not utilise the full potential of the topic and are instead statically argued for, leaving one to wonder what the added value of the collection as a volume actually is. All in all, Marrin's volume achieves neither of the two goals that it had set out to achieve and instead comes across as a somewhat sloppy and static hodgepodge of views. Seeing the importance of the topic, particularly in recent times, and the added value that contributions by such knowledgeable writers could

have had, it is a shame that the final product does not live up to the expectations.

About the author:

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