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Ways To Make Analysis Relevant but Not Prescriptive

Fulton T. Armstrong

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The CIA is neither a policy nor a law-enforcement agency—this is our mantra from the day that we sign on. Analysts do not have policy preferences. Analytic products do not lean in specific policy directions. The Agency produces intelligence free from political bias.

We say implicitly that we focus on *national* interests, not the policy or political interests of an administration or the Congress. Every piece of intelligence we produce is to be both policy relevant and—despite the correlation between relevance and the political stakes behind it—reflect a non-politicized interpretation of the national interest. We say we can swim without getting wet.

Remaining relevant but neutral is a noble goal, but not an easy one. The lure of conforming to the view of reality held by interested players in the Executive and Legislative Branches is strong, although our culture in the Intelligence Community alerts us to resist. But who determines what is in the national interest if not the policymakers and the political processes that empower them?

The answer, in a democracy such as ours, is *no one*. Our system encourages a political competition to define problems as well as solutions. "Good analysis of the problem gets us 90 percent of the way to a solution," a senior national security adviser told me. For that reason, one party may see the other's analysis of an international matter as a crass manipulation to achieve an advantageous policy outcome. In fact, some solutions are embraced more readily than are analyses of the problems. In the late 1990s, for example, US counternarcotics efforts in Colombia received bipartisan support, but there was nowhere near a consensus on the causes, effects, and prognosis for the Andean nation's difficulties—or the resultant implications for what we loosely called "US national interests."

Analytic papers in the Intelligence Community traditionally have ended with a section that lays out the implications of foreign developments for US national interests. But how do intelligence analysts know what measures to use? At the dawn of the 21st century, rapid changes in international affairs and in how they are covered by the information business, of which we are a specialized part, make defining and prioritizing national interests more urgent and more difficult than ever before. We in the Intelligence Community have to do a lot of the defining for ourselves.

Over the years, I have seen policymakers and politicians apply the term "national interest" to

four different types of priorities, only one or two of which are of genuine strategic importance.

Fundamental National Security Interests

Extremely few matters fall into this first category of national interests, which comprises goals of a high order on which there is public consensus without debate. Included here are policies aimed at protecting the United States, its citizens at home and abroad, and key national economic relationships from immediate threats. These objectives are almost universally accepted. Although some observers may quibble with aspects of the execution of the current "war on terrorism," for example, no one has challenged that it is clearly in the national interest to destroy Osama bin Laden, his organization, and its significant enablers. No one would argue against responding forcefully to an effort to invade our national territory or blockade US ports. This is safe analytic territory.

Administration Priorities

Most policies, however, neither are so directly linked to the well being of our nation nor enjoy such broad support. Many are actually policy *preferences* laid out by an administration. They enjoy the political backing of the President, his cabinet, and, usually, a significant portion of the US Congress and the public. Most people would readily concede that such policies are compatible with our national interest, but support is not universal. Many who agree on the goals assert that there are better ways of getting there.

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The advancement of democracy in Latin America, for example, is a perennial policy that few cavil with—at least until it is pitched against competing interests. During a tour as a policymaker at the National Security Council (NSC), I routinely heard (and made myself) appeals for policies under the comfortable rubric of "promotion of democracy." But I also routinely encountered arguments that it was *not* in our national interest to demand too much from societies that plainly were not ready. On no issue was this paradox clearer than on Haiti in the late 1990s: Although extensive data indicated that opponents of President Aristide were weak and divided, our policy was to support the political opposition as a driver for democratic development and a wedge against Aristide's efforts to consolidate his less-than-fully-democratic power. Now, several years later, little, if any, progress toward the consolidation of democracy has been made and the suspension of international assistance has driven the Haitian economy deeper into the mud, hindered the emergence of civil society, and raised the threat of mass migration. How has the US national interest been served?

Promotion of free trade is another sweeping policy that enjoys broad support, even as US regulations and legislation at times pull us in the opposite direction. Support for free trade is premised upon the belief that every country has a comparative advantage in some products, which it can use to develop a trade pattern that benefits itself and its trading partners. Until the current economic crisis in South America, US trade officials were often faced with a dilemma: Should Washington support MERCOSUR, the customs union in the Southern Cone of South America that promotes free trade among its members but imposes high tariffs on outsiders?[1] What about Brazil, a member of MERCOSUR whose tone on trade issues bordered on anti-US rhetoric—was that country a friend or a foe in Washington's effort to promote free trade? Free-traders said "foe," but the administration determined that because MERCOSUR drove regional economic integration and trade expansion it was compatible with US objectives.

The war on drugs is based on a clear, almost-universal concept of the national interest—to protect

[1] MERCOSUR is dominated by Brazil and includes Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Chile and Bolivia are observer members.

the American people from the scourge of psychotropic substances and the crime that they engender—but counternarcotics policy has not had universal support and, at times, has butted up against other national interests. Some critics question the morality of the United States spraying herbicides on wide swaths of other countries' cultivated land when we do so little here at home to stop the use of the narcotics. Others focus on the pressures generated by the drug problem for Washington to cooperate with the likes of former Peruvian President Fujimori, whose governance had clearly undemocratic aspects, and his intelligence chief, a human rights abuser and illegal arms marketer.

Many such decisions reflect policy preferences that touch on competing national interests. Policymakers consider it in the national interest to promote sound environmental practices, but they are often reluctant to condition free trade agreements on such practices. Administrations put differing emphasis on strengthening and using multilateral institutions: They pick and choose which summit venues—the Summit of the Americas, the UN General Assembly, APEC, the G-7—will be largely ceremonial and which will be treated as serious opportunities to advance US agendas.

Sectoral Preferences

When two sets of perceived national interests collide, what measures should intelligence professionals use to evaluate the gains and setbacks for Washington from developments in foreign areas? Sometimes issues that do not affect the whole country become elevated to national interest status because of the power of their constituencies. While generally consistent with the national interest, these policy priorities favor one parochial position over others. Their proactive constituencies espouse approaches that their opponents claim overshadow more important issues. Should analysts accept the point of view of narrow interest groups as valid expressions of national interest, when an administration appears to endorse them?

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On Cuba, senior and mid-level policymakers have barely concealed in the past the fact that a relatively small constituency is the most intense promoter of the “pressure cooker” approach of maintaining the economic embargo, isolating Havana internationally, and promoting internal upheaval. One past Coordinator for Cuban Affairs at the State Department would answer challenges to the government's policy, in open forum, with the answer, “Cuba is first and foremost a domestic political matter.” You do not have to be a cynic to see a link between Cuba policy, Florida elections, and campaign finances. Most observers judge that the chance is extremely slim that explosive change on the island—the sectoral interest—would result in stability and democracy—the national interest. But that view continues to underpin the interpretation of our national interests in Cuba.

In Venezuela and Colombia, the interests of US oil companies—in addition to the US government's desire to ensure oil flows—carry weight in political deliberations. When analysts were studying the potential impact that a proposed purchase by Chile of advanced fighter aircraft would have on the military and political balance in South America, US aircraft manufacturers had already presented their case to government officials. Should intelligence analysts accept the companies' view—and subsequently the administration's position—that the sale of arms better served US national interests than a continuation of arms control efforts in Latin America?

How should intelligence analysts, from around the globe to cubicles inside the Beltway, discern and prioritize US interests? Is a setback for a US corporation—say, a tariff that hurts its competitiveness—a setback for the US national interest? What if a corporation sells a product damaging to peoples' health, such as cigarettes? What if a firm is

incorporated in the United States but has no American factory or workforce? What if the company has been involved in a scandal? Which factors count, and which do not?

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) must be on the agenda of any administration because of the vast sums of money at stake for US businesses. But policymakers are aware that certain IPR violations—such as the provision of illegally produced drugs to the desperately ill and pirated software to small businesses—help to promote social and economic well-being in less advantaged countries. Pirated medical textbooks enable universities in the third world to train doctors, which is arguably in the US national interest. How should intelligence analysts sort out the priorities when national interests conflict?

Bureaucratic Interests

Finally, sometimes a department, agency, or employee of the US government puts parochial or personal interests first and subsequent actions become *de facto* statements of national interest. This happened when the US military disagreed with aspects of US policy on Haiti and unilaterally suspended deployment of military medical personnel to run clinics for Haiti's poor. An Embassy sometimes soft-pedals a demarche when it is ordered to register a complaint but does not want to disrupt comfortable relations with the host government.

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A desk officer in a policy agency who disagrees with a particular policy may leak details to Capitol Hill or the press in hopes of stirring opposition to it. Or a State Department officer hoping to become an ambassador some day may act on instructions from Senate staffers with more alacrity than on guidance from his own bosses. How is an intelligence analyst to separate the wheat from the chaff and discern true national interests? Chaff masquerading as “national interest” handicaps the ability of intelligence analysts to evaluate the impact of foreign developments on the United States.

The Real World

“National interests” are not absolutes. The complex dynamics that underpin policy preferences are part of living in the real world. Priorities are never as clear-cut as policy rhetoric would have them. It is the responsibility and prerogative of the policymakers to determine how conflicting interests will be prioritized for their purposes. It is particularly tough when policymakers' appetites for intelligence contributions do not correlate closely with the lofty priorities we think we should be supporting. Indeed, many of us have worked late into the night to meet a policymaker request for intelligence on a matter that is presented as being of urgent national interest, only to find out later that our support was used to help one side in a bureaucratic dogfight.

For intelligence professionals, this real world poses tough questions for analyzing the implications of foreign developments for US national interests. Analytic papers traditionally address “Implications for the United States,” not “Implications for Administration Priorities” or “Implications for US Political Horse-trading.” Such sections often have a contrived feel because the genuine national interests are not clear. The temptation to take sides in policy debates is strong, but analysts can run into trouble even inadvertently, because there are so many types and levels of “national interest.” If we are not careful, sections that address “Implications for the United States” can become policy-prescriptive simply by describing a positive outlook that coincides with a policy direction or expressing pessimism about a foreign country's course of action, and can appear to “poke the policymaker in the eye,” as former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates used to say.

So What Can We Do?

To stay clear of minefields, the crucial first step is to consciously assess the different categories into which US interests fall—not an easy task because all inter-

ests seek to cloak themselves as "national" interests.[2] To do that, in my opinion, requires intelligence professionals to *follow the policy and political debates* and know where various policymakers and politicians are drawing the lines on national interests. Our job is to remain outside the policy and political process, not to be ignorant of it. To navigate around the shoals of debate, we have to know where the points of contention are.

We can garner only a piece of this from policymaker "feedback" on analysis, although such channels of communication are important. In my personal experience, feedback should always be taken with a grain of salt. Administration officials are human, and it is natural for them to favor information that supports their views. Policymakers usually are not eager to challenge us or put opposing views on the table—because they see no benefit in questioning the conclusions, want to avoid the appearance of unduly influencing analysis, or are too harried to take the time.

[2] Our mission would be simpler if we worked to the policy agenda of the President only. The agencies of the Intelligence Community belong, after all, to the Executive Branch, the President was elected by the American people, and the Constitution gives him leadership over foreign policy issues. We would cast any warning in terms of threats to the President's initiatives, and any opportunities in terms of promoting his agenda. We would provide only that information and analysis that promoted the array of national, policy, and political interests that the President brought to each issue.

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Periodic internal reviews of our work provide more meaningful insights into the quality and timeliness of our support to policymakers. Analysts should also seek information from outside the administration—from public forums, nongovernmental organizations, and Capitol Hill. Analysts should be versant in the policy and political sides of their stories. Savvy intelligence requires it.

The Intelligence Community should consciously *embrace available tradecraft tools* to move safely and productively through the minefield of competing national interests. When applied in a rigorous, systematic fashion, these tools help give meaning to our non-bias mantras.

Commit to all-source information. Analysts traditionally have had a bias in favor of clandestine reporting, and a brimming inbox leaves little time for seeking data elsewhere. In addition to building context for good analysis, all-source information gives us a deeper sense of what policy, political, and bureaucratic agendas are being brought to bear on an issue—and helps us steer clear of appearing to take sides. This is especially important in the new intelligence age, in which collection resources are increasingly fine-tuned to address specific, narrow intelligence problems. Policy support should be called "intelligence" because of the analysts' value-added, not the clandestine sourcing.

Use alternative analysis. Single-line analysis entails selectivity in the use of evidence and argumentation and, therefore, results in a relatively narrow interpretation of US interests. Explorations of alternative possibilities are more intellectually honest, pre-judge policy preferences less, and have a longer shelf life. Reinterpreting evidence based on a recognition that the assumptions, drivers, and implications in our main line of analysis may be wrong or skewed can force us to recognize the legitimacy of different perspectives and keep us from getting too close to one policy thrust or another. My bet is that, if rigorously worked into analytic products, alternative analysis would be much more meaningful than the generally forced and stilted "Implications for the United States" sections as traditionally written.

Balance warning and opportunity intelligence. Warning is useful to the senior policy generalist—who uses it to keep the regionalists and specialists on their toes—but it tends to reflect a narrow understanding of our national interests. Merely to warn is somewhat extortionary; it tells policymakers that we see circumstances harmful to national interests according to a single interpretation of them. It covers our rear ends—we can

always say we "told you so"—but it leaves the policymakers exposed, often without providing actionable intelligence that would help them develop a viable remedy. Good opportunity analysis, on the other hand, provides the policy community with an inclusive assessment of how various US interests are affected by evolving circumstances. Done right, opportunity analysis reflects the complex array of interests that policymakers are trying to juggle. If a foreign government is headed toward a decision harmful to a US interest, analysts may see opportunity to promote other interests, perhaps as a *quid pro quo*. Foreign policy does not follow a straight line; analysis should not either.

Steer clear of value judgments and value-laden labels that assume a certain interpretation of our national interests. We should stick to providing as sharp, complete, and balanced a picture as possible, and leave the judging to the policy and political world. In leadership analysis, for example, monikers such as "reformer," "populist," or "decisive leader," are not as meaningful as laying out evidence about a leader's position on an issue of specific interest to the US policymaker. Adulation for Argentine President Carlos Menem in the 1990s, for example, blinded senior officials in the US government, International Monetary Fund, and elsewhere to the long-term damage caused by corruption during his two terms, leaving Buenos Aires (and Washington) with a $140 billion financial crisis to worry about. An overly Castro-centric interpretation of events in Cuba, some would say, has impaired the United States' ability to see opportunities to promote our interests effectively on the island.

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The Bottom Line

The policymaker (or his or her boss) was elected by the American people to make value judgments. It is our job to develop a framework to help policymakers weigh multiple options, but their job to determine how to react to challenging situations, from turning the other cheek to staging a full confrontation. It is our job to discern whether the Argentine government's new economic policies will enable it to survive and satisfy people's needs, but it is the policymakers' job to determine whether Argentina's steps warrant US and IMF help. It is our job to assess the intentions, strengths, and vulnerabilities of violent groups, such as the Colombian FARC insurgents, but it is the prerogative of senior US officials to brand them "terrorists" and include them in the Global War on Terrorism. It is our job to provide information on whether the Cuban government is supporting terrorist activities, but it is the policymakers' choice whether to keep Cuba on the State Department's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. It is the decisionmakers' prerogative to decide whether rhetoric hostile to a US policy—say, criticism of the war in Afghanistan—is a "setback" for the US national interest in absolute terms.

The Intelligence Community should provide policymakers with analytic products that are realistic and reflect a range of legitimate interpretations of events and their implications for the United States. We should be the radiologists: We take the picture and read the spots on it to the best of our ability, but we leave the diagnosis and cure to the doctors. We should provide the facts and possible interpretations of them, but not apply a value ruler. Our products should reflect an awareness of the immutable "national interests" as well as the *range* of policy options and political preferences—and not prejudge them for the policymaker.