National Security Machinery Inquiry: The NSC and Intelligence “Effects”

Executive Summary

1. The NSC oversees Intelligence “Effects” as well as Intelligence “Coverage”. Combining the two risks fusing intelligence and policy, threatening the integrity of the Joint Intelligence Organisation. This risk could be further exacerbated by turning the National Security Advisor into a political appointee. Policy implications, including effects, need to be firewalled from analysis. The Intelligence Community must be able to push back against ministerial desire for effects and the “tyranny of the tactical.” Scrutiny is vital. However, given the need to balance fusion with departmental ownership, the UK has traditionally struggled with the central governance of covert capabilities. Greater open discussion about governance of effects work would be beneficial.

Context

2. From 2016/7, the NSC agrees and oversees an Intelligence Coverage and Effects (ICE) plan. The National Security Secretariat is responsible for coordinating the annual ICE process – between January and April – before the NSC agrees it in May or June.

3. The ICE plan replaced the Priorities for Intelligence Coverage, previously set by the Joint Intelligence Committee. This is significant because it broadens intelligence requirements away from coverage to include ‘Effects’, defined by the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) as ‘Agencies’ engagement in activities which have real world outcomes.’ SIS’s effects work is classified; GCHQ’s effects work involves offensive cyber operations.

4. The NSC oversees strategies which set the direction of effects operations and ensures alignment with policy. Against Russia, for example, HMG does not deploy effects with the goal of effecting organisational collapse in a way that might be deployed against international terrorist groups.

5. The ICE plan is monitored by a steering group, headed by the JIC chair, which meets quarterly and comprises senior officials from the Agencies’ main customer departments. It ensures that GCHQ and SIS remain on track, reviews any changes or pressures, and monitors longer-term requirements.

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3 ISC, ‘Russia’, (2020).

4 Ibid.

The Dangers of Fusing Intelligence and Policy

6. Intelligence effects are designed to influence the real world. They therefore sit in the policy, rather than intelligence, realm; they are a form of policy implementation.

7. This creates challenges. Successive inquiries have thought carefully about the coverage side of intelligence – intelligence as information – especially since 2003. There is a clear consensus that intelligence assessments need to be firewalled from the interests of partisan politics so as to preserve their objectivity and integrity. As early as 2011, the Cabinet Office reviewed the relationship between the JIC and the NSC machinery. The ISC subsequently warned that policy implications and analytical judgements had to remain separate.

8. Unfortunately, little – publicly available – analysis of effects operations exists. Such activity cannot be coordinated through the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) without risking its analytical independence and integrity. The role of the NSC machinery, with its inherent involvement of partisan politics, risks exacerbating the problem.

9. On the other hand, developing and implementing effects outside of existing machinery and bypassing the JIO would involve a prohibitively expensive and wasteful duplication of effort. The UK has long struggled to resolve this trade-off in governing deniable/unacknowledged execution of policy. Although consensus exists regarding the management of the JIO, management of covert action has consistently failed to achieve a similarly stable modus vivendi. It is difficult for an outsider to judge, but, given the current attention devoted to effects operations, governance and the relationship to intelligence coverage certainly requires close review. Implications for policy (effects) need to be firewalled from intelligence analysis in assessments. This, however, is difficult when it is the intelligence agencies executing the policy.

10. Turning the National Security Advisor into a political appointment risks exacerbating the problem. It could undermine the ability of the intelligence community to ‘speak truth to power’ and could lead to the inappropriate use of effects operations by, for example, not challenging political assumptions or ignoring their limitations.

Ministerial Direction and the ‘Tyranny of the Tactical’

11. The NSC was an important development in formalising the relationship between senior politicians and the intelligence community. Historically, the attitudes – and even personalities – of individual prime ministers have been highly influential in shaping the intelligence machinery. This often proved problematic, as critics of Tony

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6 Lord Butler’s Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (2004) is a particularly important example.
Blair point out, **Formalisation does not go far enough** though: the NSC is not a statutory institution and so remains subject to the whims of the prime minister (as Boris Johnson’s absences demonstrate).\(^9\)

12. Amidst the increased prominence of intelligence effects and ongoing talk of grey zone operations, the NSC forum becomes crucial. Surrounded by their intelligence chiefs, **prime ministers can wrongly see effects operations as a quick and easy answer to a difficult problem and so task intelligence to “fix” something.** This can lead to short-termism and ill-thought through operations in which means do not match ends. David Cameron apparently pushed for covert operations in Syria despite being told in the NSC that they would not work. Amidst concerns that the NSC might create a “tyranny of the tactical” regarding intelligence coverage, the Cabinet Office reviewed relations between the JIC and NSC 2011,\(^10\) but no similar – publicly available – review has taken place about “effects”.

13. The NSC machinery allows the intelligence community to explain the limitations of intelligence – in terms of both coverage and effects work – and to answer questions. It also allows them to push back against unfeasible ministerial requests. Again, therefore, making the National Security Advisor a political appointment is problematic. **Intelligence assessments should not be politicised to justify ministerial desire for effects.**

**Ownership and Coordination of Effects through the NSC**

14. Scrutiny and coordination are vital to prevent politicisation and the “tyranny of the tactical”. Integrating covert capabilities into full-spectrum responses (as per the Fusion Doctrine) create two trade-offs. First, **it is difficult to ensure appropriate ownership, whilst, at the same time, allowing sufficient interdepartmental input to ensure stimulation of activity, coordination, and scrutiny.** Tensions between the FCDO and the MoD during the development of the National Cyber Force demonstrate this. It now appears that the Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary will have a role in signing off different types of operations.\(^11\)

15. Second, **a trade-off between broader discussions (necessary for fusion) and smaller discussions (necessary for sensitive operations) exists.** The NSC offers a neat compromise here. Effects work seems to be devised, authorised and implemented through departmental channels but the NSC sets broader objectives and the direction of travel. However, given the high levels of secrecy it is difficult for an outsider to pass judgement on how this works in practice. It has seemingly suffered practical problems. Reports, based on leaked documents, suggest that the strategy which set the direction of effects work in Syria was ‘opaque’ and ‘weak.’ This apparently led to ineffective strategic communications operations, lack of coherence and duplication of

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effort. One thing is clear though: the UK has traditionally struggled with balancing ownership and scrutiny, leading to much disagreement between diplomats and the military in particular. More open discussion about the governance of effects work would alleviate this.

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