



QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE RECENTLY RELEASED CANADIAN INTELLIGENCE PRIORITIES

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KEY EVENTS

On November 21, 2024, Dr. John Gilmour and Mr. John Pyrik presented *Questions Raised by the Recently Released Canadian Intelligence Priorities* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CISIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were tactical and strategic priorities for Canada's intelligence community, the evolving nature of threats to Canada, and how to counter non-traditional threats.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Canada's intelligence priorities have been released publicly for the first time in sixty years. The priorities have a largely tactical focus, with no indication that Strategic Warning Intelligence (SWI) is an area of focus in today's evolving security landscape. Given the varied nature of the intelligence priorities presented, both "traditional" and "non-traditional", one would assume an associated risk assessment of the listed priorities is crucial as non-traditional security challenges emerge and force agencies to expand their mandate while likely not being granted additional funding.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The presentation spoke to the intelligence priorities released by the Government of Canada in September of 2024. Intelligence priorities are not a recent development, being updated every two years for almost sixty years. Intelligence

priorities are created in partnership and shared with law enforcement agencies, diplomatic services, and various branches of the military. The national security culture in Canada suggests the priorities recommended by senior intelligence officials do not receive much pushback from elected officials charged with setting intelligence priorities as to rationale, history, impact or emerging priorities, possibly due to a lack of understanding of the intelligence enterprise in Canada. Intelligence priorities provided by Cabinet often provide a general direction, guiding the overall actions of agencies with specifics left up to individual organizations, for instance, a directive as broad as requiring action on al-Qaeda or Sunni extremism may be given to an intelligence agency with a specific breakdown of challenges and steps required to address the threat at the discretion of individual agencies.

Canada's new intelligence priorities break down threats into traditional and non-traditional. Traditional threats include foreign interference, espionage, arctic security, defence operations, serious crime to a degree and border related issues. Non-traditional threats include climate change, food security, supply chain, health security, and immigration security, marking the first time non-traditional threats have been recognized in Canada's intelligence priorities. This has come after Canada faced international pressure to counter non-traditional threats to support international partners and address threats to its own self-sufficiency and sovereignty.

One immediately obvious concern is the fourteen priorities that were listed were not in themselves prioritized by any numerical ranking. In suggesting there are fourteen different priorities, the listing represents more of a shopping list or menu as opposed to something more modest based on diligent threat/risk modelling and analysis.

Most new information about non-traditional threats is likely more scientific or "clinical" rather than being state-driven or political in nature, meaning that traditional security agencies may not be best equipped to recognize these threats as they emerge. The expertise to identify such threats exists within specific departments in different government agencies; however, the primary challenge is whether senior officials in these agencies can recognize and articulate the threats in the language of national security assessments familiar to policymakers and that are "actionable". A similar challenge, faced the intelligence community in the aftermath of 9/11 as al-Qaeda was seen as a something new – a transnational threat, that led to new agencies such as CATSA, ITAC, CBSA, and INSET teams, being assigned to terrorism related threats, along with specific

departments to coordinate information sharing across the breadth of agencies now responsible for countering terrorism.

Another key challenge for existing agencies and any that may be potentially created are financial constraints in face of the need to expand their mandate to cover the recently released intelligence priorities. One way to address these threats is a risk assessment of the danger presented by the threat. However, this needs to be done with caution as the language of risk can be easily misunderstood. Expanded public/private sector cooperation, especially with new, non-traditional threats is becoming necessary and can prove helpful in the face of financial constraints and as the private sector assumes primacy in areas such as the cyber domain and even in certain ways and means in intelligence gathering as evidenced in the current conflict in Ukraine

The recently released intelligence priorities have a tactical, “day-to-day” focus with the need to improve a capacity for Strategic Warning Intelligence (SWI) not included as part of the current intelligence priorities. Proper SWI gives policymakers the benefit of having a 18-24 month heads up on upcoming threats and how to prepare for them. This is because in the past decades, threats have been relatively predictable (e.g. the cold war, WMD proliferation, nuclear weapons, espionage) leading to SWI being allowed to atrophy. Policymakers prefer actionable intelligence, i.e. tactical. However, with new threats SWI needs to be prioritized once again. Although nothing precludes analysts from having a strategic focus, almost 90% of current CSIS analysts are tactical rather than strategic with most Five Eyes partners sharing similar priorities.

A reason for the tactical focus of intelligence products can be attributed to a lack of interest from clients in strategic warning. Convincing senior leader policymakers to address a fire down the street when one is already burning down the house can be challenging. For instance, the Global Public Health Information Network (GPHIN) under the Public Health Agency of Canada was responsible for collecting data on global intelligence related to disease outbreaks. However, the agency was reduced to a shell of its full capabilities by 2020 when COVID-19 was spreading across borders and an adequately staffed GPHIN would have been able to provide the government with critical pandemic related data. This can partially be attributed to a lack of policymaker interest. Another example is the policy advice on managing a pandemic provided by Canada’s 2004 national security policy not being adopted or provided adequate funding which left Canada worse prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Intelligence priorities are necessary however publicly releasing them can be problematic. This is exemplified by the timing of the release of the current priorities with foreign interference placed at the beginning of the list at the same time as the foreign interference inquiry was ongoing. Moreover, public scrutiny can affect the government's position, and although warranted to some degree, it can and does cause disruption for intelligence agencies as well since resource redeployment becomes necessary as a new direction is adopted. This is not advantageous for the intelligence agencies as it puts them on a defensive footing, being reactive rather than proactive. Additionally, due to the priorities being released at the same time as the foreign interference commission they did not receive adequate media coverage and have led to concerns about the timing of the release. The majority of the document discusses the capabilities and nature of intelligence along with which agencies conduct intelligence, which provide an introduction to the nature and practice of intelligence but reduce the discussion of intelligence priorities in the document. In consideration of this, Canada would have benefited from the intelligence priorities being kept secret.

New Zealand is the only other Five Eyes partner that publicly reveals their intelligence priorities. A comparison with the list reveals that certain priorities on New Zealand's list were left out from Canada's intelligence priorities, including- space, economic security, disinformation, strategic competition and threats to the rules based international order, and threats to citizens overseas (especially when considering the case of the two Michaels in China). It is worth noting that Canada's priorities regarding the economy had a narrow focus on securing the financial sector unlike its allies that have a broad focus, considering intellectual property theft or strategic commodities as an economic threat.

The intelligence priorities present an opportunity for cooperation and increased partnership between CSIS and the RCMP, especially in the area of organized crime which is becoming a national security threat as it is used by India and Iran to further their goals in Canada. A partnership in this area would be beneficial especially as the RCMP has a process designed to rank organized crime groups, which can then help in risk assessment and help prioritize organized crime groups, allowing for the impact of law enforcement policies to be tracked over time. At CSIS, government of Canada intelligence priorities are operationalized by the Intelligence Requirements Document (IRD). This guides all collection and production. Every report filed from the field includes an IRD code to ensure resources are expended appropriately. the headquarters in Ottawa to look at how many meetings took place for every code.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Canada's intelligence priorities have been released for the first time in sixty years. It poses the question why and if the timing at which they were released (i.e. under the shadow of the foreign interference commission) had any impact on the decision to make them public.
- The intelligence priorities are focused on tactical rather than strategic threats, with no indication that development of SWI capabilities is a consideration for the priorities.
- A risk assessment of the threats listed is necessary as they are too vast to divert resources to all at once especially with an expanded mandate and no additional funding for some agencies.
- They present a chance for CSIS and the RCMP to work together in certain areas that are now considered a national security threat such as organized crime where the former can leverage the experience of the latter.

FURTHER READING

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