



POST-COVID WORLD: DEALING WITH FUTURE HEALTH CRISES AND THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

Date: November 26, 2021

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 26, 2021, Dr. Patrick Walsh presented on *Post-COVID World: Dealing with Future Health Crises and the Role of the National Intelligence Community* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed by Dr. Walsh were the emerging health security threats and risks and the role of the intelligence community in managing these threats and risks.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Walsh focused his presentation on the upcoming health security threats and risks that could be faced in a post-COVID world. He compared the pre-COVID responses to health and biosecurity threats to the COVID era, with the intent to assess if these quick reforms and responses seen during the pandemic would be transformative and be carried into a post-COVID world. Dr. Walsh also discussed some of the areas that need to be looked at in order to improve the effectiveness of the intelligence community's response to health security threats.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Walsh discussed policy challenges and post-COVID leadership around global health security. The spread of misinformation and disinformation in the COVID era was also discussed.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Walsh's presentation began with describing COVID-19 as an existential crisis and how there is a need to take a look at the arrangement and capabilities of intelligence agencies and their relationship and purpose to these emerging threats. Dr. Walsh noted that national security was not just about sovereignty and peace but also about a nation's experience and their ability to build resilience and provide security on education, housing, economic opportunities, and health. Health security relates to whether states and global society can provide security from pandemics and other intentional and unintentional health threats to its citizens. Dr. Walsh noted that, traditionally, the intelligence community views health security in a narrower perspective, focusing on the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) space. However, he suggested that the intelligence community should view it in a broader sense considering potential and emerging threats such as pandemics, food security, dual-use research and synthetic biology (e.g., gene editing), and cyber-biosecurity.

Dr. Walsh proceeded to discuss in greater detail some emerging threats in health security such as stolen biological agents, which is rare due to stringent security and biosafety measures but is more likely in vulnerable states. Another threat is dual-use research and synthetic biology, such as the development of mRNA vaccines to fight COVID-19 and other diseases and how the techniques and processes used to develop these vaccines could be manipulated for malicious intent. Dr. Walsh also discussed bio-cybersecurity, which relates to the intersectionality of cybersecurity and biotechnology. Biotech is multidisciplinary and complex; it can range from energy, research, food, pharmaceuticals, and national security. Since these are not just cyber issues but also biosecurity issues, there is a need to understand the two together to better respond to the threat.

Dr. Walsh noted that the role of the intelligence community is to reduce strategic uncertainty for decision-makers and disrupt tactical and operational health security threats and risks; however, the intelligence community's track record for understanding health security risks and threats has not been great. As examples, Dr. Walsh pointed out the overestimation of Iraq's bioweapons program and the underestimation of the Soviet Union's bioweapons program, which were due to a range of reasons. Dr. Walsh stated that tasking and coordination, collection, and

analysis are some of the challenges faced when dealing with health security issues.

Intelligence should be tasked by decision makers, but suboptimal risk and threat methodologies do not help the intelligence community nor decision makers to task more effectively. Decision-makers were relatively disengaged from health security issues prior to COVID-19, but now post-COVID, there have been some discussions and early actions about national health security or biosecurity/biodefence strategies in the US and the UK. However, Dr. Walsh questioned whether these actions are just an inevitable response to catastrophic threats or if they are transformative changes. Dr. Walsh further noted that unless there is a sustained political will and focus on these issues post-COVID, there is the risk of returning to the pre-COVID situation.

In terms of collection, it is challenging to collect against a threat that could be well embedded and hidden in legitimate scientific research. Traditional collection methods—signals intelligence, human intelligence, and geospatial intelligence—have a potential role in understanding emerging health security threats, but it might be difficult to define in what context they are relevant. Dr. Walsh noted that open-source intelligence—peer review sources, social media, epidemiology, and microbial forensics—might be more important, but they have not been integrated into the intelligence community.

There are some pockets of excellence in the Five Eyes agencies regarding the analysis of health security threats, but they are at the low level. The restructuring of the intelligence community after 9/11 impacted the analytical capabilities in health security threats. According to Dr. Walsh, the challenge now is finding out how to develop the workforce going forward. Empirical and interpretive analytical methodologies such as social sciences and multidisciplinary biological sciences will be crucial in combating this challenge.

Dr. Walsh stated that to improve the effectiveness of the intelligence community's response, three areas need to be considered: governance issues, intelligence and stakeholders, and oversight and accountability. To deal with this, there needs to be a central internal and external focus in government to take ownership; a health security coordination council, preferably led by the head of government; a national health security strategy; and a point of contact within the intelligence community. Dr. Walsh believes that it is important for the intelligence community to learn from national and multilateral stakeholders. At a national level, a strategy that specifies activities of all agencies and helps plan and invest in future resilience against pandemics and other health security threats

is crucial. At a multilateral level, there needs to be World Health Organization reform debates, a G20 independent panel report for pandemic preparedness and response, and possibly a joined-up approach by the Five Eyes on health security. In terms of accountability and oversight there is a need for further investigation of all bio-related laws to reduce conflict around the role of the intelligence community; regulation around dual-use research although there is no internal regulatory body that all agree with; and a look into data related issues that branch from public health surveillance and national security surveillance, as well as their effectiveness and their ethical risks.

To conclude, Dr. Walsh reiterated that there is a role for the intelligence community in managing these uncertain health security threats and risks. Policy at the intelligence level is needed, and COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to restructure intelligence agencies and improve governance issues. Dr. Walsh stated there is a need to review all liberal democratic country's biosecurity and bioterrorism arrangements, which should take a health security perspective; develop a national health security strategy, which should clearly articulate the role of intelligence community agencies and all stakeholders; and coordinate health security for the entire intelligence community by a senior intelligence official who has authority to direct and coordinate collection and analytical resources.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, the audience asked Dr. Walsh what policy suggestions he would advise to emulate the health challenges faced by the leadership and intelligence governments today. Dr. Walsh stated there is no 'silver bullet' in a public policy setting, and the focus should be on how to respond to a biological agent that is ever-changing and unpredictable. He reiterated from his presentation that a national health security strategy is vital for all countries and good leadership. There needs to be a government-led, well-thought-out public policy that is strategic in operation response to future health security issues. Dr. Walsh was next asked what he foresees the future leadership in global health security in post-COVID-19 to be, to which he replied that on a domestic level, governments need to protect and preserve lives. Going forward, he believes there is a need for political leaders that prepare their nations and demand a global policy to stop mutations from occurring and spreading.

The next question presented to Dr. Walsh was about how the intelligence community can address misinformation and disinformation campaigns fueling conspiracy theories that have reduced the ability to eliminate the spread of

COVID-19. Dr. Walsh noted that there is a long-term and a short-term aspect to this question; however, he stated that he could only speak about the short term. Intelligence agencies have already started to find and disrupt the sources of misinformation; however, it can be seen as hindering free speech, which is a slippery slope. Dr. Walsh believes misinformation to be an extension of infodemia in modern society, which the intelligence community has been struggling with and will continue to because of its volume. The only way for intelligence agencies to fight misinformation is to look at external research to help better amplify their own efforts around the subject.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- National security can stem from a nation's experience and their ability to build resilience and provide security on education, housing, economic opportunities, and health.
- The intelligence community should view health security in a broader sense, such as pandemics, food security, dual-use research and synthetic biology (e.g., gene editing), and cyber-biosecurity.
- Three main threats in health security are stolen biological agents, dual-use research and synthetic biology, and bio-cybersecurity.
- Challenges faced by the intelligence community regarding future health crises include tasking and coordination, collection, and analysis.
- To improve the intelligence community's response there is a need to address governance issues, take into account intelligence and stakeholders, and improve accountability and oversight.

Question Period

- There is no 'silver bullet' for policies surrounding health security, so the focus should be on how to respond to a biological agent that is ever-changing and unpredictable.
- There needs to be a government-led, well-thought-out public policy that is strategic in operation response to future health security issues.
- The intelligence community needs to look for external studies and research on misinformation to have more effective ways to control it.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (PATRICK WALSH, 2022)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>