

Overview

Intelligence sharing in NATO

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This article will address the eternal tension between the need for intelligence sharing and protection of sources and methods jealously guarded by intelligence agencies. Having been both a counterintelligence officer and an analyst, I understand the need for both. During the Cold War, NATO relied heavily on US intelligence contributions. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and ultimately new missions, i.e., in the Balkans and Afghanistan, NATO began to call for broader intelligence cooperation. This essay will focus on a large milestone in NATO intelligence-sharing, the establishment of the NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre (NIFC) in 2006 and speculate on the most recent development, the appointment of Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven as the first NATO “intelligence chief”. When first writing about the creation of the NIFC, we suggested that it could serve as a precedent for the long-needed reform of intelligence at NATO headquarters in Brussels.¹

Soon after The Wall came down, an astute student in a seminar at the now-National Intelligence University asked whether NATO would still exist in 10 years. The class had no immediate answer. However, an international conference on “Europe after the Revolutions of 1990”, held that June at the National Defense University in Washington, concluded that NATO would still remain relevant to Euro-Atlantic security. NATO would likely be called upon to address instability unleashed by ethnic tensions kept largely under control by both superpowers during the Cold War. Second, NATO should keep its powder dry; Russia would rise again. Certainly, the first speculation became reality in 1995, when NATO shifted from static defense of Europe against the Warsaw Pact to major “out-of-area operations”, first in the Balkans and later in Afghanistan.

Establishing the NIFC

The NATO intelligence reform that led to the NIFC took place in roughly two overlapping phases. The first was a result of instability in former Yugoslavia, when NATO for the first time found itself engaged in “out-of-area operations”, initially in Bosnia in 1996 (SFOR) and then in Kosovo (KFOR) in 1999. Except for the establishment of the Allied Military Intelligence Battalion (AMIB) in Bosnia, NATO intelligence relied on the nations through national intelligence cells (NICs) for “reachback”. Nearly a score of nations created cells at these headquarters, primarily to serve their nations’ deployed forces and key staff officers. In the process, informal procedures developed for intelligence sharing and discussion of current issues among the NICs. For example, the US NIC in Pristina developed informal procedures for intelligence sharing and discussion of current issues among the NICs; the Nordic NIC (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland) held monthly events and even invited guest speakers to provide greater context for such discussion. Nevertheless, during this period protecting information remained paramount as NATO focused on “enlargement”, welcoming 10 new members from the Warsaw Pact from intelligence services that had been “on the other side”.

The second phase came as a result of major NATO transformation efforts in the wake of the 9/11 attack when the Alliance invoked Article V for the first (and only) time in its history. The next year, the Prague Summit (2002) enumerated the various challenges facing NATO in the new environment: the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD); the need for new operational capabilities in critical areas; developing partnerships with Russia, Ukraine and others; the strategic partnership with the European Union; not to mention the continuing role of NATO in Afghanistan and in the Balkans. Among the many NATO transformation initiatives agreed to at the Prague Summit belongs improvement of NATO intelligence to support the new missions.

The Prague Summit's mandate to streamline the NATO command structure, in effect to address the legacy of the Cold War organization to accommodate new missions, ultimately led to the creation of the NIFC. The summit called for reducing the number of regional operational commands from five to two, leaving two Joint Forces Commands, one in Brunssum in the Netherlands and one in Naples, Italy, subordinate to Supreme Headquarter Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). SHAPE became the sole strategic command and was renamed Allied Command Operations (ACO).

The SHAPE commander, General James Jones, realized that he would need more intelligence assets to support operations in NATO's growing mission. In order to move quickly, Jones acted to increase intelligence staff at the operational level as a "US initiative", while proposing that this intelligence-support organization would be part of NATO if possible. Co-locating what became the NIFC with the US European Command's (EUCOM) Joint Analysis Center (JAC) at RAF Molesworth, UK, immediately came to mind.

An initial effort in late 2003 considered building on the Multinational Intelligence Coordination Cell (MNICC) at Molesworth, which US Secretary of Defense William Perry established in 1996 to support NATO Balkans operations. However, the MNICC remained a small organization, staffed by NATO officers on a voluntary basis, usually only a few months at a time, providing reachback to national capabilities and producing some analysis based exclusively on open-sources. Early discussions concluded that the MNICC could not serve as the core of the new organization and that a larger and more ambitious enterprise was warranted.

Consequently, plans began to take shape in early 2004. If NATO could not sanction the NIFC officially, the US was prepared to establish the Centre as a US initiative. As it turned out, NATO could neither agree on officially establishing the Centre nor even on the name, which is why the NIFC had to be officially called at first the "IFC in Support of NATO". Nevertheless, the project came to fruition under US auspices. In official NATO terminology, the NIFC is a "multi-national memorandum of understanding (MOU) organization" under US sponsorship as the "Framework Nation" and chartered by the NATO Military Committee on 13 December 2005. The North Atlantic Council on 18 October 2006 activated the NIFC as a "NATO Military Body with International Military Headquarters Status".

The NIFC's purpose was to provide "an objective and robust intelligence organization" to support NATO operational and strategic requirements for out-of- area operations. The NIFC reached full operational capability in December 2007.

“If you build it, will they come?”

With the establishment of the NIFC, sharing information was to replace protection. Thus, when SACEUR Jones opened the NIFC in RAF Molesworth, UK, he stressed: “The purpose of this center is to share, not to protect...Mutual trust and cooperation are critical for mission success”.

As the organization rapidly developed, it moved from its initial facility, a World War II hangar, into a new 19,000 square-foot complex with bespoke infrastructure that included a technologically advanced 24/7 Situation Centre (the next phase of the plan envisioned doubling the original building size).

As participation of the NATO nations was important to the successful establishment of the NIFC, the answer to the question “if you build it, will they come?” was affirmative. A snapshot of the organization in 2010 revealed that all the NATO nations except Iceland and Luxembourg had representation at the NIFC. In addition, as bureaucratic and security hurdles were surmounted, seven non-NATO members, such as Finland and Sweden, who regularly participated in peacekeeping and other international operations could participate in the NIFC for specific missions. Moreover, the NIFC was pleased with the quality of its people, about half of whom are military, assigned for usually a three-year stint. Nearly all seemed to want to be there (in a rather remote location 45 minutes from Cambridge) and many reportedly had to compete for the assignment. Furthermore, the quality of personnel was high, with an average of 17 years of experience. The NIFC boasted 3 PhDs, 63 masters, and 84 bachelor’s degrees, with 37 languages spoken or read.

Results

The NIFC has made considerable progress fostering intelligence and information-sharing among its members. The various nations are fully integrated among the NIFC elements. Although by agreement the US holds the commander’s position, leadership within the various elements is dispersed with no compartmentalization in the building. Of course each nation has a “National Room” outside the NIFC building, which offers each participating nation the opportunity to establish secure communication with its capital. The National Rooms permit national reachback acquisition of more releasable intelligence for use by the NIFC. To preclude possible isolation of the various nations and to foster collaboration, the rooms, (which resemble small rural outhouses) are small, jokingly described as cooled in the winter, heated in the summer, with no place to sit, thus encouraging all to spend most of their time in the NIFC building. Morale is high for various reasons, according to NIFC officials. The organization has good leadership, it has the resources it needs, and the analysts are permitted the freedom and time to produce meaningful analysis. The NIFC does not produce “agreed intelligence”. That all of the NIFC’s products are shared with all of the NATO members is a further incentive for NIFC personnel to cooperate and for their nations to participate by sending staff.

Although an assessment of the NIFC’s effectiveness is beyond the scope of this lecture, one should discuss two related functions that convey a sense of the NIFC’s activities: response to Requests for Information (RFIs) and reachback. The NIFC receives tasking from the nations and other NATO offices through SHAPE (ACO). Operational units such as ISAF task the NIFC

directly. Perhaps the biggest volume of RFI responses has been for various geospatial products, an excellent example of the NIFC's ability to harness US intelligence support directly to NATO. Thus, the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), which is the custodian of a number of Joint Intelligence and Surveillance NATO standardization agreements, works closely with the NIFC supplying analysts and data to support the mission. The NGA sees the NIFC as an organization, "where analysts from NATO nations work together on critical GEOINT products, an excellent environment in which to teach each other and develop tradecraft".

As the NIFC was a relatively new organization, reachback played an important role in establishing its presence in the complex world of intelligence support to operations and planning. The NIFC deployed liaison officers (LNOs) to Afghanistan on a voluntary basis for tours of about 3-6 months. The purpose was not to perform product analysis, but "to make yourself relevant", making the NIFC known in appropriate circles and coordinate and synchronize production among other supporting intelligence elements and the NIFC. The LNOs would facilitate analyst collaboration and interaction and the distribution of NIFC products.

"Contradiction in terms"?

In many ways, the establishment of the NIFC was advocated in a prescient article by Edward B. Atkeson, a retired US Army major general (and former adjunct professor at what is now the National Intelligence University). In a classified article published in 1984 (partially declassified in 2008), "Design for Dysfunction, NATO Intelligence: A Contradiction in Terms", Atkeson bluntly noted that NATO had opted out of the intelligence business; it had no inherent capability for detecting or analyzing what was going on. Because the US had the preponderance of intelligence assets, Atkeson called for subordination of the overall American structure, but under the command of a US official. He argued that NATO needed to find a way to provide all its elements with good intelligence, something that security restrictions and the ongoing disparity among nations in intelligence capabilities militated against (to this day one might add).

Atkeson warned that without such intelligence reform many NATO elements might find themselves in the dark at critical moments. He cautioned that we must be sensitive to the perceptions of our allies that we are advocating US control of NATO intelligence. To the contrary he contended, we are advocating a NATO "takeover" of US intelligence with wartime direction emanating from the NATO command structure.

Atkeson's 1984 call for NATO intelligence reform has begun to take root with the creation of the NIFC and now the consolidation of intelligence at NATO Headquarters in Brussels with the appointment of the first Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence and Security (ASG-I&S). The latter development was a result of a meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 8-9 July 2016 in Warsaw, where the heads of state and government stated the requirement to strengthen intelligence within NATO. They stressed that improved cooperation on intelligence would "increase early warning, force protection, and general resilience".

Priorities for the “intelligence chief”

In an excellent September Research Paper “Trust (in) NATO; The Future of Intelligence Sharing within the Alliance”, Jan Ballast stressed the enormous challenges in intelligence-sharing, assessed the future of intelligence sharing in NATO, and recommended nine priorities for the new ASG-I&S, who seems to have solid qualifications as a former German ambassador and Deputy Director of the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND). As space does not permit discussion of all the recommendations, we will mention the most cogent to give a sense of the challenges facing the new ASG-I&S.

The most important priority is to merge all intelligence elements, military and civilian, internal and external, at NATO Headquarters-level (which has already begun) into the new Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD). Ballast recommends patience for the second priority, intelligence sharing, while calling for the continuation of bilateral arrangements between NATO and its member states. Third, however, Ballast recommends acknowledging a dominant role of the United States, which “has the most operational intelligence to share...and will also be crucial in facilitating (future) infrastructure to enable the exchange process” (p. 12). The US will also be critical in addressing other constraints of multilateral intelligence-sharing such as over-classification, disclosure and oversight, as the fourth priority. At the same time, the ASG-I&S should “develop intelligence sharing as a process”, which will take time and patience.

Progress in NATO intelligence reform, however, is likely to remain at best painfully slow, if the Alliance does not recognize the pressing threat to its space. The mission drives intelligence; Europe is under siege, pressed to defend its borders with the rise of Russia, instability in the Middle East and Africa, (millions of refugees seeking safety), terrorism, and trafficking in people, drugs, and weapons of mass destruction. Have we forgotten the post-Cold War dream of Europe whole and free and at peace? Instead, Europe seems to be building internal walls and weakening if not dismantling the institutions that have promoted free travel and trade within its borders. Who else but NATO is organized and able to take on this mission? Although some have called for the European Union to fill the gap (an option discussed at times before as an alternative to the US role), the EU seems incapable of so doing, despite the establishment of the EU Counter-Terrorism Center in January 2016, which has made modest gains in sharing.

Thus, NATO can and must adjust its focus to the current threat. Despite its ups and downs, US leadership and engagement remains essential in this process. Words attributed to Winston Churchill can offer a somewhat reassuring thought to those who see a leadership gap: “You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing, after they have exhausted all the alternatives”.

During the Cold War, NATO tended to rely on the US for the preponderance of intelligence. Sharing was not a big concern; Allies seemed content with this arrangement. But new missions, NATO’s first out-of-area operations in the Balkans and then the attack on the US on 9/11 when NATO invoked Article V, motivated the Alliance to try to share more intelligence. Thus, we suggest that recognizing and defining new missions today should help focus NATO intelligence and foster increased sharing.

Joseph S. Gordon works at the National Intelligence University. This essay represents the personal views of the author and is not the official position of the US Department of Defense or the Defense Intelligence Agency.

¹ This lecture is based in part on Joseph S. Gordon, "NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre (NIFC)" in Gregory Moore, ed, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Intelligence, Vol. 2* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 645-60.