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The National Security and Intelligence Advisor's Leadership Challenge

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Key Points

- The Canadian security and intelligence community needs new gateways to ensure that key intelligence products reach the prime minister, cabinet ministers and deputies.
- The national security and intelligence advisor (NSIA) must shift from being a “coordinator” and convenor to being the leader of the security and intelligence community.
- Seizing on a new mandate letter, the NSIA must ensure the rapid delivery of a substantive national security strategy, accompanied by a strong engagement plan to inform Canadians.
- The NSIA must work to change the culture of Canadian intelligence.

Introduction

The Canadian security and intelligence community faces the need for transformative change to ensure its ability to deliver impactful intelligence products to senior decision makers. Demands for change respond to deficiencies in intelligence dissemination revealed through two recent public inquiries, media leaks, parliamentary investigations and the work of independent, external review bodies. Transformative change requires a new governance capacity for leadership and direction of what has historically often been a deeply siloed system. The recent issuance of a mandate letter by the prime minister puts a new onus on leadership in the security and intelligence community on the part of the NSIA.

The management of the Canadian intelligence community's production of reports used to be a secret. Thanks to two recent public inquiries and a lot of media, political and public attention, that is no longer the case. But in the wake of all that attention, an important

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question has emerged: How can the command-and-control system for intelligence reporting be improved? The costs of failing to make changes should be obvious — dysfunction and, in the worst case, important reporting falling into “black holes.” Political embarrassment for a government can easily follow, as in the case of intelligence reports on Chinese foreign interference in Canada, which sometimes failed to reach the desks of decision makers (Tunney 2023).

The first thing to note is that the Canadian intelligence community churns out an impressive volume of reporting. A rough estimate is that it numbers some 70,000 intelligence products annually. The NSIA, Nathalie G. Drouin, has testified that she receives about 100 intelligence reports per day on average (Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference [PIFI] 2024).

But voluminous intelligence reporting is not an end in itself.

What is the purpose of it all? In the words of one former senior British intelligence official, Sir David Omand (2010, 22), “the most basic purpose of intelligence is to improve the quality of decision-making by reducing ignorance.” To fulfill this objective requires the production of relevant, high-quality intelligence that reaches decision makers in a timely manner and is understood by them and acted upon accordingly.

Intelligence is not of a singular nature but is instead shaped by its uses. As Omand relates, some intelligence is for situational awareness; some serves to develop a broader explanation of the significance of a report; and some is more predictive in nature. Each category of intelligence might serve the needs of different sets of intelligence readers or “consumers” (ibid., 24–25).

Intelligence in Ottawa

The process whereby these varieties of Canadian intelligence reach decision makers is complicated by many features of Canadian governance. These features include, at the very outset, decisions on the targeted circulation of intelligence reporting by originator departments and agencies. The application of “need-to-know” principles and the imposition of security classifications, often at a high level, can limit distribution and readership. Tracking mechanisms to record the circulation of intelligence reports are

important but may not be sufficiently robust and comprehensive. Once intelligence reports land, they can be absorbed for discussion into a multiplicity of officials' committees, which exist at various levels from that of the deputy minister on down in the hierarchy. This is a feature of government by committee that can create overlap and confusion about policy outcomes, and it compounds the difficulty of knowing how intelligence reporting may have impacted on policy making. The intelligence machinery itself reflects the broader principles of Westminster-style government, with its ultimate emphasis on ministerial accountability. The inevitable outcome is a system that faces organic challenges in ensuring that intelligence reporting makes its mark.

Any intelligence reporting system is a product of both machinery and people. Even the best-honed process for intelligence dissemination requires people to make it work and people to appreciate the value of intelligence and give it proper attention. For senior decision makers, especially at the political level, this involves spending time during their very busy days untethering from smart devices to read highly classified intelligence in a secure setting, and a willingness to see intelligence reporting as an essential component of smart decision making.

This complexity of issues involved in the dissemination and use of intelligence inevitably leads to an important conundrum about command and control: Who is in charge? The answer historically has been many people and no one.

In a Westminster system, ministers are accountable for the work of their departments, while the prime minister is accountable for the overall functioning of government. There is no single minister charged with accountability for the intelligence function. The minister of public safety has a large portfolio, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canada Border Services Agency. The minister of national defence has responsibility for the Communications Security Establishment, Canada's cybersecurity and foreign signals intelligence agency, and for the defence intelligence effort headed by Canadian Forces Intelligence Command. The minister of foreign affairs oversees Canada's diplomatic reporting and initiatives such as the Global Security Reporting Program. And these are only the big three. Other ministers are responsible for immigration security issues and economic security, for example. So, in the end, many ministers hold pieces of the accountability pie. It would be a radical change to

make one minister accountable for the entirety of the national security and intelligence (NSI) system, something that has never previously been attempted.

Accountability is necessarily and appropriately distinct from command and control, not least to allow for professionalization and insulation from political interference. Operational command and control of the NSI system is vested in the professional civil service, where deputy ministers are in charge of the activities of their own departments, but senior officials are responsible for the "coordination" of the NSI enterprise.

The history of this coordination function dates back to 1985, prompted by long-standing concerns over foreign intelligence and by changes ushered in by the creation of CSIS a year previously (Barnes 2019). A "security and intelligence coordinator" was established in the Privy Council Office (PCO) that year. The office functioned with little public notice or attention, and no accountability. The role was briefly mentioned in a pamphlet published by the PCO in 2001 (ahead of the September 11 attacks), which was designed to provide Canadians with a general description of the Canadian security and intelligence community (PCO 2001). The coordinator was superseded by the creation of the position of national security advisor (NSA) in 2003. This change was part of a wider reform of the national security system, including the creation of a new department of Public Safety, prompted by the strategic impacts of the September 11 attacks and an altered global threat environment.

Evolution of the NSIA Function

The first NSA, Rob Wright, once described the new office as a "Security and Intelligence Coordinator on steroids."¹ A brief description contained in the National Security Policy released in April 2004 simply said that the NSA was to "improve co-ordination and integration of security efforts among government departments" (PCO 2004, 9). The extent to which it was actually on "steroids" remains difficult to

¹ Private communication. The first security and intelligence coordinator, appointed in 1985, was veteran Canadian diplomat Blair Seaborn (see Donaghy 2019).

determine, but in April 2017, the title of the position was changed through an Order in Council to NSIA.

Some indication of the significance of the function could be found in the 2018 framework report on the government's security and intelligence community, published by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP). The NSICOP report identified the NSIA as a "core component" due to "the important role the Advisor and his or her officials play in advising the Prime Minister and coordinating much of the security and intelligence community" (NSICOP 2018a, 19).

The very first partial exercise of external accountability of the NSIA function came in November 2018, with a special report published by the NSICOP. This report discussed the role played by then-NSIA Daniel Jean in addressing concerns about foreign interference that emerged during the prime minister's official visit to India in February 2018 (NSICOP 2018b).

More accountability is to be anticipated following the announcement by NSICOP of a full review of the NSIA function, with a report anticipated for the fall of 2025 (though this may be delayed in the event of a general election and changes to the membership of the committee). NSICOP indicated that its review would do two things: "describe the current role of the NSIA and how it has changed since its inception in 2003" and "review the legislative, regulatory, policy, administrative and financial framework of the NSIA as well as its activities" (NSICOP 2024).

The committee's study was clearly prompted by both a more expansive role being played by the NSIA, which first came to public attention in response to the Freedom Convoy protests in early 2022, and by disquieting indications of problems with the dissemination of intelligence within the federal government that have emerged since the fall of 2022. In a commissioned report written for the Public Order Emergency Commission in October 2022, this author noted that "seemingly ad-hoc decisions to have the NSIA responsible for compiling situational reports for Cabinet, and to have the Intelligence Assessment Secretariat that reports to her responsible for pulling together an integrated intelligence picture, suggests that there are lessons to be learned about strengthening the central governance of the national security and intelligence community and its responsiveness to public order emergencies" (Wark 2022, 32).

The rise to public prominence of intelligence dissemination problems accelerated with leaks of classified intelligence to media outlets regarding intelligence reporting on foreign interference campaigns conducted by the People's Republic of China. This led to bouts of revealing parliamentary testimony, as well as the government's decisions to create an independent special rapporteur on foreign interference, and to request that studies on foreign interference be undertaken by the two review bodies — NSICOP and the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA). Ultimately, concerns about the government's handling of intelligence reporting on foreign interference led to demands by the opposition parties for a public inquiry, to which the government eventually acquiesced and subsequently launched in September 2023.

David Johnston was appointed as the independent special rapporteur on foreign interference on March 15, 2023, and issued his first report two months later, on May 23. His was the first public report to identify problems with the dissemination of intelligence reports. He noted that "it is clear to me that better systems are essential to process the enormous amount of intelligence produced every day. It needs to be someone's job (or multiple identified peoples' job) to decide what goes to the NSIA and what gets briefed to the political levels (i.e. to Ministers and their offices)" (Johnston 2023, 19).

Johnston indicated that he intended to pursue this issue in the second phase of his mandate, which never came to pass owing to political opposition to the independent special rapporteur approach and his decision to resign.

Prompted in part by the findings of the ISR, the NSIRA, one of the two review bodies requested by the government to study the issue of foreign interference, decided to focus its reports specifically on the issue of intelligence dissemination. Released on May 27, 2024, the report concluded that "there were significant disagreements between constituent components of that community [the security and intelligence community], both within and across organizations, as to whether, when and how to share what they knew" (NSIRA 2024, v).

Regarding the role of the NSIA, NSIRA also found that "while the NSIA plays a coordinating role within the security and intelligence community, the bounds of that role are not formally delineated. As such, the extent of their influence in decisions regarding the distribution of CSIS intelligence is unclear" (ibid, vii.).

The NSIRA then recommended that the role of the NSIA be described “in a legal instrument,” including “with respect to decisions regarding the dissemination of intelligence” (ibid., 38).

The PIFI was able to draw on the independent special rapporteur’s report, and the NSIRA review, among other sources. Its final report was published on January 28, 2025. While the report acknowledges the significance of the NSIA role, it makes no recommendations for change (PIFI 2025, 51).

The NSIA Mandate Letter

The government did not wait for any push from the PIFI final report, instead deciding to give greater public clarity to the role of the NSIA. The responsibilities of the office have now been set out in a mandate letter — the first of its kind — issued by the prime minister to the NSIA on November 25, 2024.²

Much of the mandate letter affirms and codifies the long-standing role played by the NSIA in coordinating the security and intelligence community. The letter lays out the NSIA’s role as the prime minister’s principal advisor on NSI issues, stressing the importance of its oversight and guidance for the functioning of the NSI system as a whole and noting its key capacity as gatekeeper for the dissemination of intelligence to the prime minister.

But the mandate letter reaches beyond this in describing the NSIA as the top-most senior-level manager of intelligence dissemination. In theory at least, the letter goes some way to answering the question of “who is in charge?,” at least at the officials’ level.

Being “in charge” is reflected in the NSIA’s gatekeeper role, which is highlighted in its duties as secretary to the Cabinet National Security Council (NSC). The NSIA is directed to support members of the NSC, which was established a year ago, “with comprehensive intelligence and strategic advice.”³ That support function extends to the prime minister as chair, the ministers who sit on the council and the deputies

who attend meetings and take part alongside their ministers.

The definition of the NSIA’s gatekeeper role provided in the mandate letter is a significant effort to clarify the powers of the office, identifying the need for one senior official to be responsible for ensuring that the right intelligence, along with the right contextual advice regarding it, reaches senior political decision makers. The gatekeeper role will also be challenging in terms of its assertion of leadership and responsibility over fellow deputy ministers with national security agencies in their portfolios. Disputes over what kinds of intelligence reports get to ministers at the NSC table are bound to arise. The NSIA will need the strong support of fellow deputy ministers — and a strong team at PCO — headed by a deputy NSIA, to achieve the leadership role for intelligence dissemination and related strategic advice as set out in the mandate letter.

The gatekeeper role for intelligence dissemination at the top table will be the true test of the NSIA’s new leadership role. It will involve a new quality control effort over intelligence products to ensure their significance, relevance, readability, timeliness and resonance in a system where political decision makers may still lack a uniform appreciation of intelligence reporting. In other words, the NSIA will be at the coal face of the intelligence producer-consumer relationship, which has often dogged the Canadian system.

The prime minister’s mandate letter is not business as usual. It signals an important move to make the NSIA more than a coordinator of the security and intelligence community — effectively, to transform the office into the leader of the community.

In addition to unique responsibilities serving the NSC, the leadership role is also set out in the priorities established for the NSIA. These include to lead efforts to produce a new National Security Strategy, as promised in the Defence policy update, *Our North, Strong and Free*; to engage with allies and international partners; to continue to lead the intelligence priorities process, now reset on a one-year cycle; and to respond to recommendations made in recent reports by the independent special rapporteur, NSIRA, NSICOP and the PIFI final report.⁴ There are both old and new elements to these priorities. The role of the NSIA in liaising

² See www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/corporate/clerk/role/mandate-letter-national-security-intelligence-advisor.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

with international partners is of long-standing; as is the centrality of the function in managing the intelligence priority-setting process. The current NSIA has played a key role in marshalling changes to important national security legislation in Bill C-70, which can be viewed, in part, as a first response to the work of the various review bodies and inquiries.

What is new among the priorities is the specific attention given to the role of the NSIA in spearheading the production of the first national security strategy to be produced in more than 20 years. Equally new is the fact that the NSIA is also enjoined to take command of public communications about the security and intelligence community. This is a startling change for an office that was, until recently, almost never in the public eye.

The prime minister's mandate letter directs the NSIA to "improve transparency and stakeholder engagement on national security issues, including by increasing the government's communication with Canadians, and enhancing engagement with Parliamentarians, civil society representatives, diaspora communities, provinces and territories, Indigenous groups, Allied partners and industry."⁵

The emphasis on having one senior official lead on transparency initiatives and stakeholder engagement is to be welcomed and hopefully will lead to more coherent and ramped-up efforts to raise awareness of NSI issues in Canada.

There can be no doubt that the scope of the NSIA's duties, as outlined by the prime minister, involve a heavy-duty mandate, and it remains to be seen how well any NSIA can deliver.

Measuring Success

There will be many ingredients needed to achieve success. Placing the NSIA in a true leadership role for the Canadian security and intelligence community will require resources, technological support, focus and an oversight ability to ensure that high-quality intelligence reports reach senior-level decision makers and are read and understood by them.

5 Ibid.

The success of the NSIA office will depend on having the right person with the right qualifications in the job — an individual who is able to command the respect of fellow deputies, ministers and, of course, the prime minister. The office will also need the right powers, tools and resources. Ensuring that the NSIA can deliver on the mandate for transparency and accountability will be a job in and of itself and will require the NSIA to be a true believer in and champion for the importance of strategic transparency. Most importantly, the NSIA's leadership will require a willingness on the part of the NSI community to be led.

Transforming a leaderless/multi-leader security and intelligence community, including moving the NSIA from a traditional coordination-and-convening function into a leadership role, will be no easy task. Emerging from the prime minister's mandate letter is one clear implication: the performance of the NSIA will in future be mission-critical for Canadian NSI.

But there is another important stake in this transformation. The NSIA may be poised to change the very culture of Canadian intelligence. How would she effect this change? By using the new powers of the office to ensure greater centralization of the dispersed security and intelligence community; by creating heightened and persistent attention to intelligence by decision makers; by providing a central focal point for addressing critical national security threats; by leading new initiatives to link public and private sector expertise; and by raising the bar of public national security literacy.

Two things should be on the frontburner of the NSIA in 2025. One is ushering into print a substantive national security strategy and truly engaging with Canadians about it. This is listed as the first key priority in the prime minister's mandate letter.⁶ The second is gathering the security and intelligence community around the value of predictive, strategic threat analysis. As Omand (2010, 26) has noted, "the record of forecasting the course of events in complex security situations is mixed, and there are real limits to how far it can be improved." But the effort has to be made. The horizons of Canadian intelligence reporting must be broadened beyond the quotidian and eyes raised beyond the frontier of present-day domestic security threats. If nothing else, the tumult of a return by Donald Trump and his chosen team of advisers to the White House adds urgency to this task.

6 Ibid.

The security and intelligence community's easiest prediction for 2025 is that global security situations impacting Canada in one way or another, in Ukraine, the Middle East or policy developments south of the border, will be very complex and compelling. The Canadian security and intelligence community has its own work to do in improving future-leaning strategic analysis, something that an NSIA must lean into and lead. As Omand reminds us, intelligence is all about reducing ignorance as we face future unknowns.

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