

Intelligence Information and Policy Makers*

Lt.-Gen. L. Shebarshin

Chief of the KGB First Main Directorate from 1989 – 1991

The purpose of this short essay is to discuss the influence of intelligence information on the political decision-making process.

At first glance, the problem appears simple: intelligence collects and analyses all data related to a certain political issue, prepares a report, and submits it to the policy maker (PM). The PM makes a decision which is implied or recommended in the report, acting under the assumption that the intelligence collectors and analysts are first-class professionals devoid of selfish or political motives, and that the PM is a reputable statesman whose only concern is the safeguarding of national interests.

This is, of course, the ideal situation; from time to time, however, intelligence reports are ignored by a PM.

A classic example concerns Josef Stalin, who disregarded intelligence reports about the impending German attack of the USSR in June, 1941. Stalin was a shrewd and experienced statesman, and Soviet intelligence was unsurpassed. There was clearly something unusual in these events.

I offer another example from personal experience: in the perestroika period, Intelligence aggressively and repeatedly warned Gorbachev, who at that time was the supreme Policy Maker in the USSR, that the situation was deteriorating in the so-called "Union of Socialist Countries", and in our own country as well. Intelligence pointed out particularly vulnerable areas, warned of future dangers, and suggested necessary political remedies. The impact of the Intelligence information on Gorbachov's policies was minimal. Some now claim that Gorbachev and some of his Politburo colleagues aimed at the destruction of the Soviet

* Paper prepared for the Round table on "Intelligence and national security at the beginning of the 21st century", Dubrovnik, Croatia, October 27-28, 2000.

Socialist state from the beginning of perestroika, that they were in fact “stooges of Western imperialism”, and secret agents of Western intelligence services. There is no reason to suspect Mr. Gorbachev of evil designs; yet the fact remains that reliable and alarming information was available and was not acted upon.

It is easy for intelligence veterans to accuse the previous political leadership of shortsightedness and even treason. (component of the KGB system); Ministry of Defense; General Staff, with its Main Intelligence Directorate; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; International Department of the Party Central Committee; Ministry of Foreign Trade; etc. This impressive though badly-coordinated machinery was augmented by the efforts of the heads of political, academic institutions (The Institutes of Asia and Africa, USA and Canada, Far East, Europe, World Economics and International Relations). To this were added prominent political observers of the national mass media, and, last but not least, individual members of the Politburo and the Central Committee, who often used their access to the General Secretary (the supreme PM) to inform him of their views, or pass on inadvertently acquired information on international issues.

This tremendous amount of information was thoroughly screened by the PM’s aides, but quite often intelligence reports were lost in the general melee. The personal contacts of the information carriers to the PM were crucial.

In order to cull diverse data on important issues (e.g. disarmament, Afghan war, developments in Eastern Europe, etc.) and prepare proposals for the PM, ad hoc commissions and working groups would be formed. As a result, intelligence information was transformed into anonymous analyses and proposals which diluted the opinions of individual participants. The opinions of academicians or political observers could be ignored (and in fact, they were seldom summoned for official consultations), but the Foreign Ministry, KGB, Defense Ministry, and CC International Departments were expected to present a collective view on all major problems. In fact, internal harmony in the top echelons was more important than external issues. Consensus was the foundation of the system.

However, there were exceptions to the general rule. Quite often those closest to the PM (Messrs. Shevardnadze and Yakovlev, in particular) were able to influence Gorbachev to disregard the information and opinions of the KGB and military, i.e., when Mr. Shevardnadze surrendered to the U.S. an oil-bearing area in the Bering sea, obtaining a **post facto** endorsement from Mr. Gorbachev without consulting the KGB or Defense.

Intelligence handles external issues which require decisions by the PM. However comprehensive, reliable, and urgent intelligence information may be, it can rarely cover all relevant aspects of the

situation, especially internal ones. Stalin's strange "blindness" on the eve of the German invasion of the USSR had an obvious explanation. Stalin was a true policy maker who had no peers within the Soviet leadership, and he was better informed than anybody about the actual state of the Soviet armed forces and the preparedness of the country for a major war. But he valued peace, and was doing everything possible to stave off the inevitable. It is worth noting that he gave an order to prepare the total evacuation of Moscow three days after the German attack, on the 25 of June, 1941, before the German forces had reached Minsk.

Intelligence professionals, both on operational and analytical levels, should not allow the configuration of forces in the national leadership to affect their assessments. Unfortunately, this factor often plays a greater role in political decisions among professionals than the actual merits of the case. There is evidence, for example, that the idea of introducing Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1979 was originated by the number two man in the Soviet hierarchy, M. Suslov, who exerted great influence on L. Brezhnev. After these two policy makers had formed their opinion, the rest of the Politburo was forced to toe the line. Intelligence assessments did come into the picture after the decision had been taken, but were tainted by balance of power considerations in the Politburo. Professionals are always subordinate to politicians; their information and conclusions are taken into account only insofar as they correspond with the ambitions and prejudices of their political bosses.

Sometimes, a PM gets caught up in an inexorable course of events and loses his ability to control the developments, both internally and externally, and, as a result, policies assume a perfunctory quality. That occurred during the period of *perestroika* in the USSR. Mr. Gorbachev would occasionally express his irritation with intelligence reports, not only because they did not coincide with his views, but because he was helpless in the face of unpleasant realities.

There are other insulating layers between intelligence information and political decisions. A Policy Maker in a democratic country finds it difficult to avoid the temptation to influence the mood of the electorate, especially in a pre-election period, by initiating dramatic foreign policy initiatives. And on occasion, foreign policy activities are undertaken precisely to divert public attention from embarrassing situations at home (a fictional situation of this kind is presented in De Niro's film, "Wag the Dog"). And there are numerous examples in history when attempts were made to ease internal crises by resorting to "a short victorious war", which would never have been recommended by intelligence.

On the other hand, intelligence professionals' complaints sometimes stem from overestimating their own achievements. An intelligence report can be absolutely correct in covering a specific event which takes place at a given time and place. If one's sources had obtained documentary information of importance, i.e., the minutes of a top-secret meeting, or something that demands attention and action on the part of the PM, facts regarding the actual meeting and its agenda can be confirmed by other sources. But if intelligence is then unable to trace ensuing events and decisions, it would be unfair to blame the PM for failure to act.

Everything becomes more complicated when intelligence must evaluate dynamic, critical situations. The factual information may reflect the state of affairs at a given moment, but the overall picture changes constantly. As tension grows, deliberative decisions become less significant, and spontaneous forces and human error assume greater importance. Analysts can, as a rule, predict logical moves of the parties involved in a given situation, but are helpless when confronted with human error. Their reports become vague as a result; they propose various scenarios, and ultimately leave the PM "holding the bag". If things go awry, the PM is then held responsible.

In sum, intelligence information is an important, but not exclusive, component of policy making. The factors involved are diverse, variable and sometimes appear irrelevant to the problem at hand.