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Biden and Intelligence: The Limitations of Going Back to Basics

Tomer Barnett and Itai Brun

Following the severe crisis that characterized the relations between former President Donald Trump and the American intelligence community, Biden's term appears to signal "back to basics." His approach strengthens the status of "intelligence experts," whose experience and activity are intended to ensure the most professional and neutral analysis of the situation possible, and underscore the importance of data and information ("the facts") and the analysis derived from them as a basis for decision making. The people appointed by Biden to the most senior positions in the intelligence community and the intelligence reports issued in recent weeks clearly reflect this trend. It therefore appears that his presidency will help stabilize the fundamentals of intelligence work, which were undermined under Trump. At the same time, the broader general framework within which the traditional intelligence concept was designed has been weakened in the post-truth era. The question, therefore, is whether Biden and the senior officials appointed by him will succeed in creating a sound, updated framework for the intelligence community's relations with its most senior consumer.

Former President Trump's relations with the American intelligence community reflected a severe crisis in the relations between intelligence agencies and decision makers, which in any case are inherently difficult. An analysis of the crisis revealed a complicated picture. Trump's criticism of the intelligence agencies, which was partially justified, indeed exposed severe fundamental problems afflicting the intelligence organizations in the United States (and intelligence organizations in general). It appears, however, that the crisis originated in a more fundamental and disturbing approach on Trump's part to the role performed by the agencies responsible for discerning reality in the decision making process and the status of the professionals working in the field. In effect, Trump questioned, publicly and vehemently, the two basic fundamentals of intelligence work: the emphasis on expertise, experience, and the adoption of thought patterns designed to reduce error and ensure the most professional and neutral analysis possible of the situation; and the central role of data and information ("the facts") in the intelligence process. (For more on Trump and the intelligence community, see ["Speaking Truth to Trump: The Crisis between the President and the American Intelligence Community."](#))

Trump's skepticism about expertise and the facts was not confined to intelligence matters and the professional intelligence echelon; it was also reflected in a more general attitude toward their role in decision making processes. This tension was highly prominent in White House policy on the Covid-19 pandemic. After the crisis began, the President took issue with the information and data showing a severe crisis and with the experts who presented these facts. He distorted, lied, and belittled the figures. When the experts refused to echo what he said, he attacked them directly.

President Biden's approach to discerning and understanding reality, and to the role of the facts and the ensuing professional analysis based upon said facts, appears to be completely different. This approach was evident from the outset in his inauguration speech, in which he clearly outlined the characteristics of the period, and repeatedly emphasized the importance of the truth at the present time. Biden reiterated that there is truth and there are lies; averred that everyone, especially leaders, has a responsibility to defend the truth and refute lies; and declared war on the culture of disinformation and misinformation. Since taking office, Biden has consistently stressed this line in his speeches. In his first televised address to the nation, he said that the only way to overcome the pandemic is by telling the truth, and in almost every speech or other statement, has repeated that the American people need "truth and facts."

Biden's approach is also clearly reflected in his appointments to key positions in the intelligence community. Avril Haines, appointed as Director of National Intelligence, has practical experience in intelligence as a former Deputy Director of the CIA. In her confirmation hearings, she stated that the Director of National Intelligence has the obligation "to speak truth to power," an expression that the American intelligence community has adopted as its motto, and added that doing so was especially important when the information was difficult to swallow or uncomfortable for the decision makers. Another key Biden appointment is William J. Burns, as Director of the CIA. Beyond his acquaintance with Biden for many years, it appears that one of the reasons for this appointment is that Burns, long in the service of the State Department, is known as a non-partisan professional who served under both Democratic and Republican administrations – a characteristic that Biden appreciates and wants to promote in the intelligence community. While Burns has had no experience in the CIA itself, he has many years of experience in intelligence work as a result of his senior positions in the State Department and as an ambassador, and enjoys excellent relations with senior administration figures in the State Department and National Security Council. In announcing this appointment, Biden stated that he and Burns share an approach to the political neutrality of intelligence and the need to respect the professionalism of intelligence personnel.

The departure from the Trump atmosphere was already evident in the publication of two intelligence reports in recent weeks by the American intelligence community: the findings from the investigation into the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the report on foreign involvement in the 2020 election campaign. Both reports are based primarily on information gathered and researched by the intelligence community during Trump's term in office, and concern issues that were disputed by the intelligence community and the political echelon. The reports themselves (which were not published during Trump's term) reflect to a large extent the difference in attitude between the former and current presidents. The strong emphasis on "facts" in the report about foreign involvement in the elections and the small number of assessments in it are consistent with Biden's guideline in his remarks about intelligence work.

Biden will likely succeed in repairing relations between the White House and the intelligence community, but there are nonetheless problems with a "back to basics" approach, i.e., the traditional patterns of activity. The fact is that some of the criticism of the intelligence community expressed by Trump during his term was justified, and addressed known fundamental problems in the American intelligence community that were independent of Trump's presence in the White House: methodological and organizational problems that led to failures of assessment; outmoded work processes that have not been adjusted to the changes of the information era; and a problematic traditional intelligence attitude typical of parts of American intelligence community, which in its extreme form holds that the job of intelligence personnel is to educate decision makers, and that the intelligence community should have a monopoly on clarifying reality.

Besides his destabilizing conduct, Trump therefore challenged the American intelligence community and intelligence methodology in general by holding up a mirror to its actions. Facts, expertise, and professional analysis are obviously of crucial importance, but the conceit of using them to educate the decision makers is unacceptable, certainly in the current day and age. Intelligence knowledge is always incomplete, fragile, temporary, and dependent on many factors. For many matters, it is no more than a system of hypotheses that must be put to the test. In others cases, decision makers have no need for information; they require an understanding of the possible directions of development. Trump's skepticism in some of these matters was reasonable, and may have brought about a reassessment of old intelligence concepts.

Biden has a long record in matters of policy, and has also dealt fairly extensively with intelligence-related matters. Various reports include him as a prominent personality who integrates appropriate elements of doubt and argument in the decision making process. For example, in a number of events, such as the mission to eliminate bin Laden, the decision on military intervention in Libya in 2011, and the discussions about the extent of military

intervention in Afghanistan in 2009, then-President Obama and other senior figures described Biden as playing devil's advocate – someone who functions as a red team to the dominant opinion in the room in order to challenge conceptions, get to the root of the problem, and make sure that all of the data and relevant information are known to the people in the room and considered. He was often entrusted with managing the decision making process for the President, either by creating a decision making room that was analytical, critical, and skeptical about the argument at hand or by recruiting experts for the purpose of rendering an opinion.

Hopefully this skepticism will also influence Biden's attitude toward the intelligence community while he is in the White House. The American intelligence community, however, is in a deeper crisis involving the more general characteristics of our era, which Trump represented and helped to shape. This goes beyond information overload, which sometimes hampers discerning and understanding the situation. The challenge is a deeper one: the liberal tradition underlying the currently prevailing intelligence concept has also undergone a crisis, in which its most fundamental values used to elucidate reality – argument, ideological pluralism, and the free market of ideas – are not only proving inadequate for dealing with the challenges of our times, but are also themselves infusing new problems of the current period into the decision making and policy shaping room. The question is, therefore, whether Biden and his team will succeed in coping with the new features of the period, and in formulating a new outline for relations between the intelligence community and its most senior consumer.