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CIA-NSA Partnership

A Brave, New World

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The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA) are moving their strategic partnership beyond the optional cooperation of the past into a new era of collaboration. The Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) has stated that much of the success against the al-Qa'ida network and its terrorist allies has been the direct result of CIA and NSA working together in the field and at headquarters. And the Director of NSA (DIRNSA) calls the two agencies' collaboration in response to the war in Iraq "unprecedented and powerful."

This article looks at the changing relationship between NSA and CIA in response to today's intelligence challenges. It examines why after 50 years of competition and uneasy alliance the two agencies are seeking new ways of doing business. Only time will tell whether this strategic partnership will last, but developments to date indicate growing awareness that the success of intelligence collection and analysis rests on the strength of collaboration.

Origins of Discomfort

CIA and NSA have a tradition of being able to work well together during a crisis or on a critical issue with predefined roles and responsibilities. A number of successful joint programs have been established over the years, and the two organizations have long provided each other with tactical assistance on a case-by-case basis.

But there is another organizational reality. CIA and NSA share a painful history.¹ Cycles of competition and mistrust between the two agencies, begun in the 1940s and 1950s, produced formidable barriers to partnership. Attitudes and issues carried over from predecessor organizations—the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA)—gave the two entities little chance to build partnership and trust. The Joint Chiefs of Staff cut OSS off from cryptologic intelligence during World War II as part of an effort to derail the fledgling organization. With its creation in 1947, CIA inherited this lack of access. During the early years of the Cold War, CIA assessments and reports were regularly contradicted by closely held cryptologic information, damaging the Agency's credibility with consumers. To avoid being blindsided, the CIA worked to secure access to signals intelligence, in the process becoming a highly vocal opponent of AFSA in Washington.

NSA, which inherited AFSA responsibilities in the early 1950s and was determined to control the fractious cryptologic community that had defeated its predecessor, viewed CIA actions as a threat. NSA leaders believed that the Agency intended to establish a rival cryptologic organization, a view reinforced by CIA's hiring of some of NSA's top cryptologists. The signals intelligence

agency considered CIA claims that it had neither the budget for nor interest in establishing parallel capabilities as disingenuous. NSA limited its assistance to CIA whenever and wherever it could, regardless of possible damage to operations and analysis. CIA felt it was being driven into competition because it needed SIGINT support for intelligence collection and counterintelligence purposes, which NSA could not or would not provide.²

Some of the actions that took place early in the history of the two organizations seem petty from today's vantage point. At the time, however, they were serious matters with lasting consequences. At one low point in the 1950s, CIA denied NSA's formidable chief, Gen. Ralph Canine, clearance for cryptologic information that it was collecting, citing security concerns. Allen Dulles later said he would never have denied the clearance had he known the trouble it would cause the two organizations in the long run. Ultimately, the clearance had to be given—CIA found it needed NSA's help to process the volume of signals information it was collecting.

As the Cold War heated up, each organization was forced to cooperate when in need of services and expertise exclusive to the other. However, no joint success was sufficient to dislodge the suspicion and mistrust that had become entrenched early on. Over time, the "stovepipes" created by separate collection missions and responsibilities hardened. Fierce competition over who controlled resources and tasking became a regular feature of interaction. CIA and NSA remained engaged in a relationship characterized by myopia, paranoia, and suspicion from the 1960s through much of the 1990s.

Barriers to Partnership

CIA and NSA evolved into organizations that had little in common except on the relatively rare occasions when their intelligence interests overlapped. As separate collectors, the two organizations naturally had different mission priorities, legal authorities, and responsibilities. They also had distinct approaches to the development and use of technology; dissimilar risk management philosophies for operations; and different expectations for action and definitions of success. The cultural divide between the two entities was apparent in everything from vocabulary to workforce management styles. The bureaucratic barriers to partnership were formidable.

From NSA's perspective, CIA was a tactically focused, reactive entity that preferred a "go it alone" approach. From CIA's perspective, NSA was incapable of taking any action before an end-to-end system was in place, leaving it mired in "process." The perception, in the words of one CIA officer, was: "If it wasn't theirs, NSA wouldn't cooperate."

Few line managers at CIA or NSA had in-depth knowledge of the mission, equities, and issues driving their counterparts. Especially vulnerable were the new managers appointed as a result of bureaucratic reorganizations at both organizations during the late 1990s. These officers had little understanding of their sister agency and, given the personnel reductions following the end of the Cold War, little time for building cross-organizational understanding.

Collaboration between employees in line units was handicapped by limited information system connectivity. Regular, computer-based information exchange, creation and/or maintenance of joint databases, and other necessary modern-day interactions were difficult at best.³ Fax messages, "sneaker net," and "tire net" remained the most efficient ways of moving information.

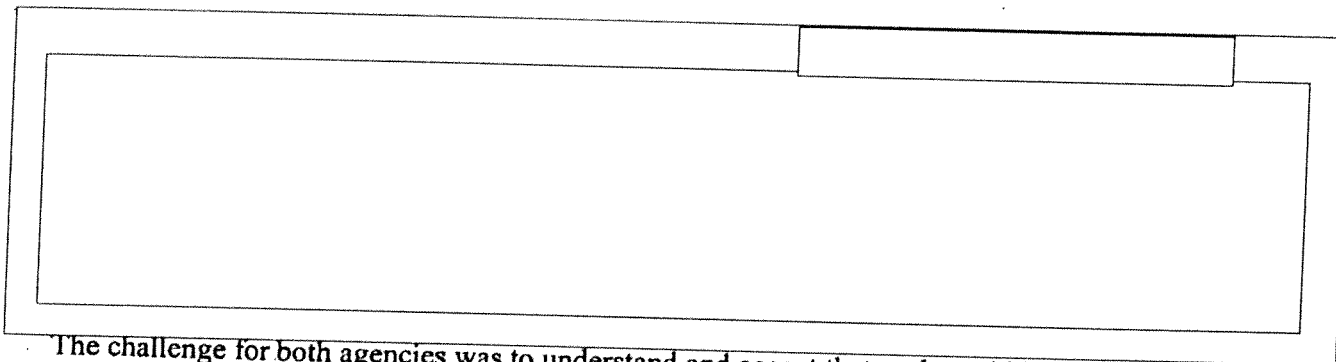
At the strategic level, the two agencies had few processes in place for establishing common goals, joint planning, and sharing credit among line units. In the absence of mechanisms for addressing

partnership-related problems, the attitudes and interests of individual managers determined, for the most part, the extent of cooperation between the two organizations.

Hints of Change

Advances in information technology provided the first serious challenge to these barriers. By the late 1990s, a handful of senior officers at both CIA and NSA sensed that collection realities were changing with the maturing of the information revolution and developments related to computer and telecommunication technology. The once-clear delineation of SIGINT and HUMINT was becoming murky. New targets requiring new collection means and new management structures were emerging. The officers judged that the two agencies were at a crossroads: They could remain locked in a cycle of competition and distrust with increasing risks of collisions in cyberspace, or they could turn to strategic partnership.

For these officers, the future success of intelligence collection rested on partnership and collaboration. They believed that neither organization could succeed over the long term without the other's assistance. Neither side would be able to duplicate the strengths, expertise, and comparative advantage of the other.



The challenge for both agencies was to understand and accept that each could be more successful with the assistance of the other than it could be on its own.

The small group of committed senior officers began to actively promote a CIA-NSA strategic partnership. Within each organization, they were able to make some progress, including improving collaboration in key collection forums and initiating new, joint projects. They were unable, however, to effect the large-scale institutional changes needed to fundamentally reshape interagency relations.

Impact of 9/11

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the US-declared war on terrorism created an imperative for strategic collaboration, particularly the cross-enabling of collection beyond anything previously imagined. It unleashed demands for new products, faster services, and immediate responses that had to be met. For the first time in CIA-NSA history, a clear requirement existed at both organizations to protect and promote collaboration. Also for the first time, managers and employees received strong, consistent signals from the highest levels: cooperate, partner, get together. In the blunt words of the DIRNSA: "Collaborate or die [as an organization]."

Interviews and observation suggest that four sets of changes have occurred over the past two years:



- Revolutionary new policies and procedures are now in place aimed at moving relevant information faster and more effectively between CIA and NSA. Such efforts began one month after 11 September 2001 and continue.
- CIA and NSA have begun exchanging line managers. There is increasing recognition that expertise can be better utilized and problems more efficiently dealt with by working together closely on a daily basis.
- New products and services have been created to strengthen support to the missions of both organizations. NSA no longer considers formal reporting to be its sole product. Informal, near-real-time alerting—such as "white wolf" tipoffs to reconnaissance aircraft approaching hostile air defense environments—is no longer confined to the cryptologic world.
- DCI George Tenet and DIRNSA Gen. Michael Hayden have sent consistent signals that institutional barriers must come down, and come down fast. As a result, senior and mid-level managers at both organizations feel empowered to remove obstacles to a more effective partnership. In the words of a senior NSA official: "Our goal is to get to 'yes.' We do not accept 'No, it can't be done.'" [redacted]

Tangible Results [redacted]

In January 2002, the DCI and DIRNSA created the Strategic Partnerships Advisory Group, a team of senior officers from both organizations focused on identifying strategies and actions to enhance collaboration. This team has promoted a number of collaborative ventures that have already borne fruit. In the generally improving climate for partnership, leaders at both organizations have been willing to take on partnership challenges. In the past, for example, [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] This action has removed a major barrier to information sharing that had existed between the two organizations for more than 50 years. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

The two agencies also created a joint Counterproliferation Fusion Cell to help focus SIGINT collection and reporting on high priority proliferation targets. Located at CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters, it is headed by an NSA officer and is staffed by analysts from both organizations.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

CIA and NSA also have established a number of joint target-development teams that meet regularly. Covering both regional and transnational issues, these teams represent a major change in the stovepipe mentality that once dominated targeting. The two organizations also have begun to collaborate on

At NSA's request, CIA has placed senior officers from the Directorate of Intelligence and Directorate of Operations in key positions at NSA.

To increase the number of general officers on rotation to NSA, the Agency is developing ways to incorporate rotations into career planning and is building an incentive package. NSA has established the position of National Cryptologic Representative at CIA to manage NSA's large number of employees on rotation at Langley.

CIA University and the National Cryptologic School have agreed to establish a joint training program that will involve developing new courses, exchanging training professionals, and opening existing classes to employees of both organizations. Entry-level orientation programs at both agencies include newly developed segments on understanding and working with each other. CIA and NSA also have established a new awards program that will recognize and celebrate outstanding contributions by joint teams or individuals working on joint projects.

Will Partnership Last?

Clearly, CIA and NSA have begun to move beyond traditional ways of doing business. But what are the prospects for strategic partnership over the long term?

The skeptics hold that the barriers separating the two agencies remain formidable. They point out, for example, that CIA and NSA are still years away from real computer connectivity. Some believe that current collaborative work on terrorism and Iraq reflects only the latest phase in the well-established pattern of working together during crises, then reverting to type when the emergencies have passed. They note that most of the changes shaping relations between the two agencies on terrorism have not migrated to other issues. In the words of one CIA official: "The further you go from terrorism, the less likely you will find that anything is different." Relations may have improved overall at the senior level and on key issues that are the focus of attention, but that does not mean that strategic partnership is a reality for most mid-level level managers and working-level officers. The behavior of those who obstruct collaboration is still tolerated; there is little recognition or reward for those who actively promote partnership.

These are valid points. On the other hand, officers who believe that a fundamental change is occurring point to a critical difference between the past and the present: the active commitment of the DCI and DIRNSA to institutionalizing strategic partnership. The new policies and products resulting from the war on terrorism and related military actions *will* migrate to other issues because they are *systemic* changes that cannot be turned back easily or selectively applied. The officers now working partnership issues will be available to protect and promote collaboration over the long term. Finally, partnership goals are beginning to be factored into long-range planning at both organizations. Problem-solving mechanisms will be available to help navigate the rough patches likely to arise from time to time.

With the partnership effort less than three years old, it is too early to tell which side is right. Organizational change is always hard. Individual entities find it difficult to transfer knowledge of what needs to be done into action, even when it is clear that failure to do so will damage or destroy

their organization. The complexity of change increases exponentially when multiple organizations are involved.

Challenges Ahead

Both sides—those believing that CIA and NSA are moving toward a brave new world and those doubting that such a world exists—agree on one point: the challenges ahead are formidable. For partnership to thrive over the long term, collaboration must grow in areas where there has been limited progress to date. Specifically:

- The policy improvements and lessons learned from joint work on terrorism issues should be expanded to counterproliferation and other high-priority transnational issues.
- The agencies must develop joint strategic planning forums so that shared needs, objectives, and targets can be incorporated into the decisionmaking processes at all levels of both organizations. This could begin with biannual strategic planning sessions at the directorate level.
- CIA and NSA need to increase the pace and scope of efforts to find joint solutions to technical problems. Robust computer connectivity between workforces, high-volume data management, and automated analytic tools are among the areas where there is a shared need for solutions and where both organizations have capabilities to bring to the table.
- The practical concerns of line officers at both organizations must be included in the issues and initiatives being worked. Partnership must include a robust effort aimed at making the work environment between the two organizations productive and efficient. Mid-level managers, who are best placed to frame the debate on how partnership should work on a daily basis, need to become more engaged in this work.

Ultimately, collaboration must become a requirement for doing business when CIA and NSA interests on targets, objectives, methodologies, or tools are mutual and complementary. Senior managers have to be willing to take action when subordinates fail to promote or protect partnership. They must remain consistent in signaling the values and rewards of CIA-NSA engagement. And managers at every level must be held accountable for advancing collaboration.

The walls of the traditional CIA-NSA stovepipes will come down most quickly in an environment in which those in positions of responsibility understand that *change must happen*. It is going to take time—a new generation of managers may need to be trained at both organizations to overcome inherited prejudices. Partnership at the working level requires extraordinary effort in the absence of full connectivity between CIA and NSA. And it is not necessarily popular—many in both organizations still believe that they can work faster and smarter alone. But, given technology and tradecraft requirements, there is no choice: CIA and NSA need each other for SIGINT and HUMINT mission success. There is no turning away from the brave, new world ahead.

Footnotes

1. The following is a summary of 50 years of a complex relationship. It is based on my interpretation of classified material available in CIA and NSA historical collections as well as

interviews with knowledgeable people at both organizations, including Dr. Thomas Johnson, who has produced a four-volume classified history of NSA.

2.

3. The reasons for limited connectivity are complex. Most have more to do with policy and procedural issues—primarily related to information security—than with technical limitations. They include concerns at each agency about information ownership, including fears of inadvertent access by foreign liaison, compromise of operational intelligence, and dissemination of information outside the chain of command.

serves on the DCI's Strategic Partnership Advisory Group.

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