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Sulmaan Wasif Khan. "The Aesthetic of Analysis: National Intelligence Estimates and Other American Appraisals of the Cold War Triangular Relationship". *Diplomatic History*: 32:5 (November 2008).

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Reviewed by **Richard K. Betts**, Columbia University

Sulmaan Khan surveys the record of National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on China during the first half of the Cold War, compares them with writings by three experts outside government (Donald Zagoria, John Paton Davies, and Allen Whiting), and concludes that the latter did a much better job of anticipating the Sino-Soviet split than the insiders. The independent observers assessed Chinese policy in a wider historical and political context, empathized with Chinese perspectives, and took account of how U.S. policy would affect Sino-Soviet relations. The failure of the NIEs "was not really the fault of the analysts who produced them.... They fell short because they did what they were supposed to do. First, they followed the cardinal rule of intelligence analysis: they refrained from mixing analysis with policymaking.... Second, the call for consensus that the NIEs obeyed was one that left little room for original, imaginative thinking.... Better guesses were made by breaking the rules the intelligence community is supposed to follow" (871-872).

This diagnosis is almost entirely correct, and Khan's discussion of the record is mostly on the mark. It would be wrong for scholars reading this, however, to conclude smugly that their work is generally superior to that of professional intelligence analysts, or that they would produce better estimates if given the chance themselves.

First, the three outside experts that Khan examines were former insiders with more personal experience than most academic analysts. Their comparative advantage was in indulging their individual insights, making interpretation almost poetry (Khan, p. 893). Government intelligence estimates are corporate products, meant to reflect the best judgment of all responsible parties, and this inevitably compromises the inspiration of any single sharp mind. It would be risky to revise the formal process of generating

intelligence estimates so that it resembled the unhindered and sometimes adventurous *modus operandi* of professors; the purpose of NIEs is not the same as the purpose of academic research.

Second, the NIEs in question were not quite as egregiously wrong as Khan implies. He criticizes the 1963 estimate for not emphasizing the severity of the Sino-Soviet split, and for distinguishing the “*de facto* break” from a formal divorce, as the document said that the two countries “share a mutual concern for what a formal break would give their common enemies” (quoted in Khan, p. 879). Khan notes critically that the 1966 NIE “observed that to the Chinese, ‘their *main* enemy was [U.S.] imperialism’ ” (quoted in Khan, p. 884; emphasis added). Or Khan criticizes the 1965 estimate because it “rejected the notion that the Chinese were interested in the sort of talks Kissinger had in mind” (Khan, p. 886) – even though Kissinger was not on the scene until years later. In the early and mid-1960s these judgments were not obviously wrong, even if they failed to predict what would happen at the beginning of the next decade.

The main deficiency of the official exercises was, as Khan correctly argues, in failing to inject the implications of American actions into the estimates of what China would or would not do. This avoidance, of course, is a rule of the game, at the insistence of the estimates’ consumers, and of intelligence managers who do not want professional contributions to be discredited as politicized. If serious discussion of U.S. policy alternatives and their results were to become part of NIEs, the estimates would cease to be accepted as “objective” or nonpartisan documents. Melding these functions can more easily be done in major interagency policy reviews that combine intelligence with consideration of options – exercises such as the National Security Study Memoranda of the Nixon administration, or Presidential Review Memoranda of Carter’s – but these are a different function than intelligence estimates *per se*. This is also why NIEs, despite their nominal status as the premier products of the intelligence community, often get scant attention from high-level policymakers.

Khan writes that “NIEs ... are of extreme importance to American foreign policy” (p. 871). This is dubious. It is useful to have NIEs because they sometimes lay down a marker for what agreed facts cannot be gainsaid by naifs or ideologues in the policy echelon. But often high-level policymakers have been impatient with the ponderousness, obviousness, and mushiness of typical estimates, and consider reading them a waste of time. Some policymakers have no use for NIEs because their own ideological predispositions make them uninterested in learning more or second-guessing the policies to which they are inclined. Others find the estimates unhelpful for all the reasons that Khan details.

Estimates on uncontroversial or lower priority matters may serve a useful tutorial function. NIEs on matters of high politics, however, are often useless, because the facts and their implications are inextricable from convictions about what the proper American policy should be. On highest priority issues, therefore, the traditional norm of producing expert consensus in national estimates should be abandoned, and estimates should be

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transformed into systematically arrayed inventories of contending arguments and evidence behind and against each argument. They would then be a relevant primer for an open-minded policymaker.¹ If NIEs on Sino-Soviet relations had done this the record would look better. But no one of consequence in government asked for quite that sort of exercise then, or since.

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¹ For more discussion of these problems see Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chapter 4.