STRENGTHENING ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THINKING IN TIMES OF GEOPOLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

Date: November 22, 2022

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 22, 2022, Randolph H. Pherson, Chief Executive Officer of Globalytica, presented on *Strengthening Analysis and Critical Thinking in Times of Geopolitical Uncertainty*. The key points discussed included emerging threats to intelligence and how to combat them with structured analytical techniques. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Pherson's presentation put forward that some of the biggest threats to intelligence could be categorised into three different types: threats to democracy, disinformation, and climate change.

Question & Answer Period

In the question & answer period, Pherson discusses soft violence and how to combat negativity in political discourse.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Pherson contended that the three main threats to intelligence are threats to democracy, disinformation, and climate change. He suggested that the main drivers challenging democracy are an accelerating pace of change, a growing desire for personal security, the growth and spread of disinformation, the

fragmentation and tribalization of society, and the weak performance of global leaders. As the world and society undergo more rapid transformations, people grow uncomfortable and that leads to a feeling of lack of personal safety and security. There are also massive machines putting out disinformation, both within and across borders. This rise of disinformation creates false, and possibly volatile narratives, causing the fragmentation of society. All these issues are exasperated by a lack of strong global leaders that can get ahead of problems that threaten democracy.

These drivers manifest as anger against elites, the search for simple solutions, increased extremism, heightened emotional political dialogue, a rise in tribalism, the erosion of political and societal norms, the growing influence of the wealthy elite, an increasing desire for politicians to hold power, and the discrediting of political leadership.

Within democratic systems, these drivers have led to corruption in the form of eroding norms. We have also seen the value of diversity, previously a positive, being weaponized. The rise of the internet and social media as news sources has allowed politicians to be more independent, and potentially less compromising. There has been a rise in general stress through society, as indicated by an increasing usage of terms such as "existential threat".

As an analytical technique, Pherson presented a two-axis spectrum, with the X-Axis representing simple issues to complex issues, and the Y-axis representing insular decision-making to interconnected decision-making. On these two axes, Pherson plotted institutions and ideals. For example, liberal democracies would be interconnected and complex, while authoritarian systems would be insular and simplistic.

Pherson's second threat to intelligence is disinformation. Misinformation and disinformation create difficulties in putting together facts that people can commonly agree on. Furthermore, cognitive biases can push political discussions from rational debate to emotionally driven and argumentative. Even analysts will fall prey to cognitive biases, heuristics, and intuitive traps. Structured analytic techniques are meant to mitigate this occurrence.

Perpetrators of mis- and disinformation will commonly exploit confirmation biases, evidence acceptance biases, and vividness biases to manipulate individual thought and behaviour. These same perpetrators will also exploit heuristics, such as the anchoring effect, groupthink, and mental shotgun, to further distort facts. Intuitive traps are also layered onto these mis- and disinformation campaigns.

This includes judging by emotion, confusing causation and correlation, and ignoring inconsistent evidence.

Pherson presented the Mueller report as an example of how the anchoring effect was used to spread disinformation. While the Mueller report came up with no evidence to conclusively determine that former President Trump was guilty of obstructive conduct, they did not exonerate him. However, AG Barr's public statements on the report intentionally misled the public to portray former President Trump in a more positive light.

Disinformation leads to conflicting narratives, fuelled by emotion as opposed to objective facts. To combat disinformation, one should take steps to fact check and use structured analytic techniques.

The third threat to intelligence Pherson put forward is climate change. Arctic ice is rapidly melting, causing a faster release of methane into the atmosphere. This increase in methane will further accelerate global warming. This could affect the dynamic of the different nations competing for control over the Arctic region. This could also shut down the Gulf Stream, causing North America to experience extreme cold. Should these major events come to pass, it could potentially be a major intelligence failure.

Pherson put structured analytic techniques as key to resolving these intelligence threats, suggesting that foresight techniques and decision support tools can be of further help.

Question & Answer Period

Regarding how soft violence is best addressed, Pherson contended that we need to aggressively reinforce standards, norms, and frameworks that promote collaboration and combat deradicalization.

Expanding on his ideas surrounding the existential threats that saturate current political discourse, Pherson suggested that groups with different values and standards all have their own existential threats, and this leads to a lack of consensus. To combat this, he stated it would be productive to find ways to remove the negativity of the discourse and flood it with positive narratives. This moves away from simply describing and exaggerating issues to talking about how to solve them. It is also key to bring in media to promote these more positive narratives.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The three main threats to intelligence are threats to democracy, disinformation, and climate change.
- Threats to democracy include an accelerating pace of change, a growing desire for personal security, the growth and spread of disinformation, the fragmentation and tribalization of society, and the weak performance of global leaders.
- Disinformation seeks to obstruct the ability for people to agree upon a political consensus by saturating political discussions with false and conflicting narratives. They do so by leveraging cognitive biases, heuristics, and intuitive traps.
- Climate change is rapidly accelerating and will continue to greatly affect the globe. Not addressing climate change could be seen as a massive intelligence failure.
- The key tools we have to combat these threats to intelligence are structured analytic techniques.

Questions & Answer Period

- To combat soft violence, we need to uphold societal standards and norms. This puts deradicalisation and collaboration as key issues to preserve said norms.
- To combat perpetuating existential threats, it is key to drown out the negativity and flood the discourse with positive narratives.