

Time to get smart in the spying game

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A few weeks ago the government released a review of Australia's intelligence community. Or rather, it released what it calls an "unclassified overview" of a classified report.

It is a strange document, and deciphering what it means for the future of Australia's intelligence agencies is a bit like intelligence work itself. It is a matter of piecing a picture together from the fragmentary and sometimes contradictory snippets of information that the government has decided to release.

The overview mostly reads like a government PR brochure, offering fulsome reassurance that everything in Australia's intelligence agencies is just fine. It says the extra money that governments have showered on the agencies since September 11, 2001, has been well and wisely spent, the extra powers they have been given have been responsibly used, and the public interest has been well served.

This must please the agencies themselves, which have been publicly mauled by previous reviews. It must please the government too, allowing it to bask in kudos for good management of this difficult area of policy. But no evidence or analysis is offered to support these assessments. We are apparently expected simply to take on trust the judgments of the review's two eminent authors.

If the classified report is as superficial as the overview makes it appear, the government has wasted its money in commissioning it. More importantly it has lost an important and overdue opportunity to take a long hard look at the intelligence community and how well it is doing its vital, risky and difficult job.

A decade after September 11, and two decades after the end of the Cold War, there remain some very big questions about the kinds of intelligence Australia needs and the capacities we have for getting it.

Questions such as these: Has the immense surge of resources and prorates towards terrorism and other non-traditional threats such as people smuggling been justified, and should it continue? Are we doing enough to gather intelligence on the newly emerging powers of Asia — such as Indonesia and China — that will do so much to shape our world? Are we doing enough to limit the risk to us from their intelligence operations? And are we too dependent on the US for intelligence on issues vital to Australia?

There are, fortunately, some broad hints in the overview that the intelligence review did indeed address some of these issues in its classified report. But alas, there is absolutely no evidence about what arguments it explored or what conclusions it reached, and the absence of hints in other directions suggests that several other vital issues were ignored.

On the positive side, several guarded references to the shift of economic weight to Asia and the rise of new powers suggests that the review may have explored what China's rise and the Asian century mean for our intelligence needs. China itself is obviously an increasingly important intelligence target as its power grows and its role and influence in Asia grow. But more broadly, the new and more fluid strategic order that is rapidly emerging in Asia as power shifts from East to West means Australia needs to know a lot more about many other countries as well.

Unfortunately, for the last decade, Australia's intelligence priorities have been pulled in the opposite direction. The intelligence agencies' extra money has been spent on terrorism and people smuggling. Our intelligence coverage of countries such as China and Indonesia has been allowed to dwindle. This would make sense if we assumed that American primacy was going to keep Asia's broader strategic outlook as harmonious over the next few decades as it has been over the past few. But this assumption is being overturned as we speak. To survive and flourish in the new Asia, Australia will

need to devote a lot more intelligence effort to the traditional business of understanding the intentions, capabilities and fears of other countries in our region.

So let's hope that behind the overview's bland hints the review has recommended a major new intelligence effort in this direction. Let's hope they have also looked searchingly at whether the intelligence effort devoted to terrorism and people smuggling is justified by the nature and scale of the threat, and by the results achieved.

The overview's breathless endorsement of the status quo raises doubts about whether the review really explored this question. If not, that is a shame. No one doubts that terrorism is an important intelligence priority, and people smuggling no doubt deserves some attention too. But when the present priorities were set in the immediate aftermath of September 11 and the Bali bombing, governments for a time convinced themselves that these were the only security issues that mattered. Now a more balanced view has been restored, it is time to revisit some of the earlier judgments and priorities.

Finally there is the question of counter-espionage. Back in the Cold War, hunting Soviet-bloc spies in Australia was ASIO's main task, and when the Cold War ended the organisation was therefore heavily cut. It has since been generously funded and extensively rebuilt to fight post-Cold War threats such as terrorism, but the old focus on counter-intelligence has never been regained. Now, as Australia's international environment again becomes more complex and contested, we need them to get back into that business in a big way. There is simply no way of knowing from the overview whether the intelligence review addressed this issue or not.

There is no evidence at all that the review addressed the biggest elephant in the room — our dependence on America for intelligence, as for so much else. There is nothing wrong with this in itself — indeed, we have benefited immeasurably from it. But that carries risks of its own. There is a small but significant risk that one way or another our relations with the US will dwindle in future, and we will find ourselves much more alone than we are today. If that happens, we will need all the intelligence we can get.

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