



Intelligence Estimates: How Useful to Congress?

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Summary

National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) are often of considerable interest to many Members of Congress. They represent the most formal assessment of a given national security issue by the U.S. intelligence community. The intelligence process, however, is not an exact science and, on occasion, NIEs have proved unreliable because they were based on insufficient evidence or contained faulty analysis. This was demonstrated in the NIE produced in 2002 on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction, parts of which were significantly inaccurate.

At best NIEs provide an in-depth understanding of a complex international situation where U.S. policymakers may perceive a need to make difficult decisions. Although NIEs can provide insights into the likely effects of certain policy approaches, they are not usually prepared to take into account the details of planned U.S. diplomatic, economic, military, or legislative initiatives.

Traditionally, Congress has not been a principal consumer of NIEs. Although Congress has on occasion requested NIEs and expressed interest in their conclusions, the experience with the NIE on Iraqi WMD and other assessments has led some Members to question their usefulness. The FY2007 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 109-364, §1213) specifically requested a comprehensive NIE on Iran. The NIE was to be prepared in classified form and an unclassified summary of key judgments forwarded, “consistent with the protection of intelligence sources and methods.” In early December 2007 the DNI released unclassified key judgments of a NIE, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*. The NIE judged “with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program.” Even though the NIE did recognize “with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons,” the public release of the key judgments at a time of ongoing diplomatic initiatives was widely considered problematical.

There seems to be an emerging consensus that publicly releasing NIEs, or even unclassified summaries, has limitations. Some of the nuances of classified intelligence judgments are lost and there are concerns that public release of an unclassified summary of a complicated situation does not effectively serve the legislative process. In passing the FY2010 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 111-84), Congress chose not to require an NIE on the nuclear ambitions of certain states and non-state actors, but rather to request biennial reports (with unclassified summaries) from the DNI. Similarly, the FY2012 Defense Authorization bill, H.R. 1540, passed by both chambers in December 2011, requires a report on Russian nuclear forces to be prepared by the Secretary of Defense “in coordination with the Director of National Intelligence.”

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Background: The Intelligence Community's Most Authoritative Products

National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) represent the highest and most formal level of strategic analysis by the U.S. intelligence community. They are by definition forward-looking; as one participant in the estimative process has written, “Estimates are not predictions of the future. They are considered judgments as to the likely course of events regarding an issue of importance to the nation. Sometimes, more than one outcome may be estimated.”¹ NIEs focus on foreign developments; they are not net assessments that directly compare U.S. and foreign capabilities and plans.

The responsibility for producing NIEs rests on the National Intelligence Council (NIC), an entity within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).² The NIC consists of senior analysts from the intelligence community and substantive experts from the public and private sector. After a decision is made to prepare an NIE, terms of reference (TORs) that define the major issues and drafting responsibilities are circulated to relevant intelligence agencies. One or more analysts, either from the ODNI or an intelligence agency, is asked to prepare a draft NIE. The draft estimate is then coordinated by senior officials of all intelligence agencies in a process that can be quite lengthy. Thereafter, NIEs are formally considered by the heads of relevant intelligence agencies and the DNI. The National Security Act requires that NIEs include, “whenever the Council considers appropriate, alternate views held by elements of the intelligence community.”³ Thus they may contain text, or “footnotes,” that pose alternative views from the judgments in the NIE. The conclusions of NIEs, however, are understood to reflect the official position of the DNI.⁴ Once approved, the NIE is forwarded to the President, senior policymakers, and the two congressional intelligence committees.

In drafting NIEs, analysts marshal evidence from all sources available to the intelligence community—human intelligence, signals intelligence, overhead surveillance, and others including the exploitation of open sources (foreign media and websites). The lengthy drafting and coordination process includes participation by agency analysts and occasionally outside experts with varying perspectives. At their best, NIEs provide a careful assessment of an international situation based on extensive collection and careful analysis that provides policymakers with insights into the opportunities and risks that the United States will face.

¹ Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000), p. 88.

² For background on the NIC and the National Intelligence Officers, see http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_home.html. The NIC was established by Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Stansfield Turner in 1979; a statutory basis was included in the Intelligence Authorization Act for FY1993 (P.L. 102-496, 106 Stat. 3191). Though composed of analysts from various government agencies and the public and private sector, the NIC has always depended heavily on CIA analysts for research and drafting NIEs. The NIC originally reported to the DCI in his role as head of the intelligence community, but the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-458) transferred the NIC to the newly created Office of the DNI. Many, if not most, current NIOs are not CIA career analysts and some observers believe that CIA's preeminent analytical role has diminished. Nevertheless, CIA has the broadest analytical coverage of any agency and the largest number of analysts and is likely to be heavily involved in the preparation of future NIEs.

³ 50 U.S.C. 403-3(b)(2)(A).

⁴ Yet according to Robert Gates, then Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, writing in 1987: “More than once, the late Director [of Central Intelligence] William Casey (and probably his predecessors) approved an estimate with which he disagreed personally, and separately conveyed his personal view to policymakers.” Robert Gates, “The CIA and American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1987/1988, p. 227.

In general, NIEs on topics that involve sensitive collection or analysis of trends that are largely unknown to outside experts are the most valuable. On the other hand, NIEs addressing broad topics such as the future of democracy in the Middle East or the likely evolution of China in the next 20 years may not necessarily yield more accurate conclusions or more perceptive insights than the work of leading academic experts. Some observers argue that intelligence estimates that deal with such topics inevitably suffer from the absence of scrutiny by the wide and disparate community of scholars that challenges and debates conclusions of scholarly works in the open literature and ultimately has an important influence on public opinion. Most NIEs, on the other hand, describe the environment in which national security policy choices will likely be made in the foreseeable future, with analysis incorporating information that is not available to the general public.

At a minimum, NIEs require that differences among analysts be confronted and described. This is an important contribution, as policymakers need to know what is known by the intelligence community, what remains unknown, and what conclusions are drawn by the government's most experienced analysts.

During the Cold War, NIEs on Soviet strategic forces provided an agreed-upon set of figures that were an integral part of plans for U.S. force structures and negotiations of a series of arms control treaties.⁵ On occasion, U.S. policies have not been coordinated throughout the executive branch or with Congress. Some policy makers assume that their own long experience and extensive personal contacts give them better insights than even the most senior intelligence officials. In considering major new initiatives, there can be an obsessive concern with the potential for leaks that limits discussion to a very small circle of advisers and excludes much of the intelligence community which is independent of political appointees.

There are other inherent limitations to the NIE process. NIEs are often prepared on broad issues that may involve not just foreign states or international groups but also the influence of U.S. policy or the interplay of U.S. with foreign actors. Although some NIEs will address the implications of several broad policy options, detailed treatments of U.S. plans have traditionally been defined as beyond the cognizance of intelligence agencies. In many cases, other agencies will have little inclination to share sensitive planning with the substantial number of intelligence analysts involved in the preparation of NIEs. In other cases, U.S. plans will depend more on future initiatives, such as legislation, that intelligence analysts would be unable to predict with accuracy.

Intelligence agencies are committed—by statute⁶ and as a matter of professional integrity—to prepare analyses that are unbiased and nonpartisan. At times, however, the bureaucratic process that produces NIEs can shape the conclusions in ways that reflect agency perspectives; this can be

⁵ In an oft-reported comment in 1967 President Lyndon Johnson stated, "I wouldn't want to be quoted on this but we've spent 35 or 40 billion dollars on the space program. And if nothing else had come out of it except the knowledge we've gained from space photography, it would be worth 10 times what the whole program has cost. Because tonight we know how many missiles the enemy has and, it turned out, our guesses were way off. We were doing things we didn't need to do. We were building things we didn't need to build. We were harboring fears we didn't need to harbor." Quoted in *Eye in the Sky: the Story of the Corona Spy Satellites*, ed. by Dwayne A. Day, John M. Logsdon, and Brian Latell (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 1. NIEs on the Soviet capabilities have been declassified and published in *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983*, ed. by Donald P. Steury (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996).

⁶ 50 U.S.C. 403-3(a)(2).

the case, for instance, when intelligence judgments about threat environments have significant implication for U.S. military force structure. Moreover, if NIEs are tied too closely and too publicly to public debates there is a concern that intelligence agencies will either be inclined to emphasize evidence supporting an Administration's preferred policy options or to avoid controversial issues.⁷

Furthermore, it has been argued that NIEs are not necessarily the most important contribution of intelligence agencies, which produce thousands of assessments of varying complexity in a given year. A 9/11 Commission staff statement noted: "Some officials, including Deputy DCI [Director of Central Intelligence] John McLaughlin, are skeptical about the importance of comprehensive estimates. McLaughlin has been in charge of the estimate process. He told us such estimates are time-consuming to prepare. Judgments are watered down in negotiations. Conclusions may duplicate those already circulated in more specific papers."⁸ A review of intelligence on Iraq by senior intelligence officials undertaken for the then-DCI in mid-2004 noted:

NIEs rarely represent new analysis or bring to bear more expertise than already exists in analytic offices; indeed, drafters of NIEs are usually the same analysts from whose work the NIE is drawn. Little independent knowledge or informed outside opinion is incorporated in estimative products. The preparation of an NIE therefore consists primarily of compiling judgments from previous products and debating points of disagreement....

The fundamental question is whether National Intelligence Estimates add value to the existing body of analytic work. Historically, with few exceptions, NIEs have not carried great weight in policy deliberations although customers have often used them to promote their own agendas.⁹

Congress as a Consumer of NIEs

Pursuant to the National Security Act, NIEs are prepared "for the Government," not just executive branch officials.¹⁰ Accordingly, NIEs are forwarded to the two congressional intelligence agencies

⁷ When an Administration is in the process of choosing a policy option there can also be a temptation for intelligence analysts to become advocates; Robert Gates claims that "Far from kowtowing to policymakers, there is sometimes a strong impulse on the part of intelligence officers to show that a policy or decision is misguided or wrong, to poke an analytical finger in the policy eye. Policymakers know this and understandably resent it. To protect the independence of the analyst while keeping such impulses in check is one of the toughest jobs of intelligence agency managers." "The CIA and Foreign Policy," p. 221.

⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States [the 9/11 Commission], *The Performance of the Intelligence Community*, Staff Statement No. 11, p.5. The drafters of the staff statement noted, however, that other officials "stress the importance of such estimates as a process that surfaces and clarifies disagreements. Through coordination and vetting views, the Community comes to collective understanding of the nature of the threat it faces—what is known, unknown, and a discussion of how to close these gaps." Ibid.

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Intelligence and Analysis on Iraq: Issues for the Intelligence Community," July 29, 2004. (The document was the third in a series of reports by the Kerr Group (Richard Kerr, Thomas Wolfe, Rebecca Donegan, and Aris Pappas) to support an internal evaluation of intelligence analysis associated with the war on Iraq. It is available on the CIA website at https://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol49no3/html_files/Collection_Analysis_Iraq_5.htm.) Some observers believe that the intelligence community's greatest contribution may lie in the area of specialized studies or short-term reports that are based on information that only intelligence agencies have acquired and that needs to be analyzed and disseminated within a relatively short time frame. Such analytical products do not, in most cases, provide the basis for an entirely new policy but can have an important influence on the development of policy (or military campaigns). They can contribute invaluable new information and analysis that will shape the policymaking process.

¹⁰ 50 U.S.C. 403-3(b)(2)(A).

(the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI)—and, on occasion, other congressional committees.¹¹ Use of NIEs by committees will vary. The two intelligence committees oversee the activities of all intelligence agencies, including their analytical efforts, and thus they review NIEs on a continuing basis. Other committees—especially the armed services and foreign affairs and foreign relations committees—may, along with the intelligence committees, be especially interested in NIEs that deal with issues that directly affect upcoming U.S. foreign and military decisions.

Although usually NIEs have been produced at the request of executive branch officials and have been used primarily by executive branch policy makers, NIEs have at times been the subject of considerable congressional interest.¹² Congress has from time to time informally requested NIEs (as was the case with the NIE on Iraqi WMDs produced in 2002, as discussed below), but the House intelligence authorization bill (H.R. 2082) for FY2008 included a provision (§407) mandating an NIE on global climate change. The Bush Administration resisted this provision:

This section sets a harmful precedent. The production of intelligence products on topics of interest to the Executive Branch or Congress should be left to cooperative relationships and established dialogue and should not be reflected in law, particularly in a manner that impinges on the flexibility of IC [Intelligence Community] professionals to approach a task in the most appropriate manner.¹³

Subsequently, the conference report on H.R. 2082 omitted the statutory requirement for an NIE, but noted that the DNI had stated that an assessment on the effects of global climate change was being prepared and the “conferees expect that the national intelligence assessment will be transmitted to Congress in a timely manner.”¹⁴ The bill was never enacted but in November 2008 the NIC published an assessment (not an NIE) entitled, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* that addressed climate change issues, and in 2009 the CIA opened a Center on Climate Change and National Security.

Congress included a requirement for an NIE on Iran in the FY2007 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 109-364, §1213) to be submitted in classified form. The statute also stated that, “Consistent with the protection of intelligence sources and methods, an unclassified summary of the key judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate should be submitted.” The Key Judgments of NIE on *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* were released in early December 2007 apparently without prior transmittal to Congress. The accompanying statement by Principal Deputy DNI Donald Kerr stated, without reference to the statute: “The decision to release an

¹¹ L. Britt Snider, “Sharing Secrets with Lawmakers: Congress as a User of Intelligence,” Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, February 1997, p. 24. Snider’s monograph although published in 1997 remains the most authoritative analysis of the use of intelligence by the Congress.

¹² For a discussion of extended controversy in 1959 over estimates of Soviet missiles, see David M. Barrett, *The CIA & Congress: the Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), pp. 323-330. In another instance in 1980 Senator Moynihan discussed press disclosures of NIEs regarding an NIE dealing with the strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. *Congressional Record*, May 15, 1980, pp. 11371-11372.

¹³ U.S., Office of Management and Budget, *Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 2082—Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008*, May 9, 2007.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008: Conference Report*, H.Rept. 110-478, December 6, 2007, p. 100.

unclassified version of the Key Judgments of the NIE was made when it was determined that doing so was in the interest of our nation's security.¹⁵

Some observers suggest that NIEs could better support congressional deliberations if they were the subject of further hearings by relevant committees. More extensive hearings by relevant committees would provide opportunities for Members to assess the validity of the information on which the NIEs were based and the extent of support for conclusions reached by the drafters of the NIE although there would inevitably be concerns about enlarging the number of persons exposed to highly sensitive intelligence, especially detailed discussion of intelligence sources and methods. Other observers caution, in addition, that making sensitive NIEs the subjects of congressional hearings, especially when an important vote is approaching, could focus media attention on intelligence judgments that are only part of a complex decision-making process. There is a concern that hearings have the potential to undermine the statutory mandate that national intelligence be objective and "independent of political considerations."¹⁶ It is also possible that the mechanics of an NIE might be misinterpreted, especially the ways in which main and alternate views are set forth, and that debate could result in "cherry picking" views that are congenial to one position or another.

NIE production schedules could also be more closely coordinated with the legislative branch to ensure that the intelligence community addresses major topics on which Congress expects to consider legislation. On the other hand, some observers argue that Congress might draw up lists of NIEs that would overly tax limited analytical resources and infringe on the President's authority to direct the work of the intelligence community.

The influence of intelligence assessments on congressional debates offers cautionary lessons. In late 1990, intelligence assessments (albeit not an NIE) concluded that Operation Desert Storm (that became the Persian Gulf War of 1991) would last at least six months and cause many casualties.

Largely on the basis of these dire predictions several Senators on the SSCI—including its chairman, David L. Boren of Oklahoma—as well as the Armed Services Committee Chairman, Sam Nunn of Georgia, ultimately voted against the resolution authorizing the President to send troops to the Gulf. Later, when it turned out that coalition forces achieved immediate air superiority and the ground war ended in a matter of days with relatively few American casualties, the Senators who had voted in the negative were understandably upset. Some had lost considerable political support in their home states as a result of their votes. Senator Nunn later said the vote not only had hurt his credibility as chairman of the SASC [Senate Armed Services Committee] but also had removed any thoughts he might have had about running for President, knowing that his vote would have been a "major debating point" in any election campaign. After all, they were Senators supposedly "in the know" and yet appeared to have egregiously misread the situation. Most felt "sandbagged" by the Intelligence Community.¹⁷

¹⁵ Statement by the Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, Dr. Donald M. Kerr, December 3, 2007. The previous month DNI McConnell had indicated that unclassified key judgments of the Iran NIE would not be released. He explained: "I don't want to have a situation where the young analysts are writing something because they know it's going to be a public debate, or political debate. They should be writing it to call it as it is. I believe that we will be better off in our community if we can do that at a classified level." Remarks by Director of National Intelligence Admiral Michael McConnell at the AIS Journalism Conference, November 13, 2007, Federal News Service Transcript.

¹⁶ 50 U.S.C. 403-3(a)(2).

¹⁷ Snider, "Sharing Secrets with Lawmakers," p. 49. Arguably, a full-scale NIE may have been more reliable.

A former staffer was quoted as saying that “the real problem for the committee was that it was never given ‘blue team’ information [information on U.S. military capabilities]. It was never advised, for example, that stealth aircraft were to be used. It was never provided an assessment of our forces versus theirs.”¹⁸

The 2002 NIE on Iraqi WMD

Intelligence analysis is inherently an intellectual activity that requires knowledge, judgment, and a degree of intuition. These qualities are usually not quantifiable nor can they be simply mandated. Erroneous estimates can occur and have occurred in recent years. The history of the Iraq NIE prepared in 2002, *Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, is instructive in this regard. The fact that Iraq had had WMD in the past and had previously used them both against Iran and regime opponents within Iraq was well known. That Iraq had violated agreements made after the conclusion of Desert Storm in 1991 and expelled international inspectors in 1998 was also incontestable. It was also evident that Saddam Hussein’s regime had demonstrated no eagerness to comply with more recent mandates of the U.N. and to cooperate with U.N. inspectors.

Because, however, much of the public debate focused on Iraq’s then-current WMD capabilities, the leadership of the Senate Intelligence Committee asked for an NIE “on the status of Iraq’s programs to develop weapons of mass destruction and delivery system, the status of the Iraqi military forces, including their readiness and willingness to fight, the effects a U.S.-led attack on Iraq would have on its neighbors, and Saddam Hussein’s likely response to a U.S. military campaign designed to effect regime change in Iraq.”¹⁹ The NIE was requested on an immediate basis. Prepared under intense pressure, the NIE was drafted and made available to Congress four weeks later, on October 1, 2002.²⁰ An unclassified White Paper, containing many of the NIE’s judgments, was issued shortly thereafter.²¹

In large measure the NIE reinforced judgments that had previously been made in earlier intelligence products. The NIE maintained:

Iraq has continued its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in defiance of U.N. resolutions and restrictions. Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of U.N. restrictions; if left unchecked, it will probably have a nuclear weapon during this decade.

Baghdad hides large portions of Iraq’s WMD efforts. Revelations after the Gulf war starkly demonstrate the extensive efforts undertaken by Iraq to deny information.²²

There was a consensus of all agencies that the Iraqis were determined to reconstitute their WMD programs and had made some progress in this effort. This judgment was pervasive among intelligence analysts in this country and abroad (indeed even some senior Iraqi military leaders

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁹ S.Rept. 108-301, p. 12.

²⁰ A summary was later made public in July 2003; at http://www.dni.gov/nic/special_keyjudgements.html.

²¹ The White Paper is available at https://www.cia.gov/cia/reports/iraq_wmd/Iraq_Oct_2002.pdf.

²² Director of Central Intelligence, *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs*, October 2002, p. 1.

believed Iraq had WMDs). In setting forth the evidence for WMD reconstitution, however, the NIE relied on evidence and analysis that was subsequently determined to be deficient. To a large extent the judgment that Iraq had begun reconstituting its nuclear capabilities depended on information regarding aluminum tubes that most, but not all, agencies judged to be designed for a uranium enrichment effort. There was a fairly wide agreement that Saddam Hussein planned to reconstitute the WMD programs once Iraq got out from under the sanctions regime.

In retrospect, few would deny that Saddam Hussein had not relinquished his ultimate goal of having viable WMD capabilities and his failure to comply with U.N. obligations regarding inspections, but it is clear that the intelligence community did not adequately flag the inherent uncertainties of the evidence supporting Iraq's WMD capabilities in mid-2002.²³ Intelligence agencies had provided copious information about Iraqi WMD programs, but ultimately did not reach accurate conclusions. In part, this failure resulted from the difficulty of the target, but it is apparent in retrospect that intelligence officials provided Congress with an over-generalized estimate that relied heavily on widely accepted judgments (a tendency that has been described as "cognitive bias") and highly limited collection from human sources (and some of this reporting was wrong), and did not offer a better sense of the ambiguities and limitations of the available evidence. In particular, in this view, the intelligence community conveyed a sense of dynamism in regard to Iraqi WMD programs that was not justified by evidence available.

This NIE has been much debated. The Senate Intelligence Committee has reported two extensive, and highly critical, assessments of the NIE.²⁴ In 2004 the committee concluded that

Most of the major key judgments in the Intelligence Community's October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), *Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, either overstated, or were not supported by, the underlying intelligence reporting. A series of failures, particularly in analytic trade craft, led to the mischaracterization of the intelligence.²⁵

Subsequently, the Commission on the Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, headed by Laurence Silberman and former Senator Charles Robb, also devoted attention to the NIE's shortcomings.²⁶

²³ Significantly, the NIE did not offer a contrarian case that Saddam Hussein did not have an active WMD program underway and was bluffing. As far as is known, no one in the intelligence community made the assessment that Iraq had only minimal WMD capabilities. Apparently no one asked the question posed by Joseph Nye, a former chairman of the National Intelligence Council: "What would it take for this estimate to be dramatically wrong? What could cause a radically different outcome?" Nye noted: "Experts often resist this exercise. Since they know their country or region and have already presented all the plausible scenarios, why waste any effort on scenarios that are by definition highly unlikely? The answer is that such questions help to alert the policymakers to low-probability but high-impact contingencies against which they might plan. It also informs intelligence agencies about obscure indicators about which they should be collecting information." Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Peering into the Future," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 1994, p. 89.

²⁴ U.S. Congress, 108th Cong., 2nd sess., Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, S.Rept. 108-301, July 9, 2004; 109th Cong., 2nd sess., *Postwar Findings About Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments*, September 8, 2006.

²⁵ S.Rept. 108-301, p. 14.

²⁶ See the report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, March 31, 2005.

After the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, the Iraq Survey Team, composed of experts from various U.S. agencies looked at all evidence available on the ground in Iraq and did not find evidence that Iraq had an active WMD effort. They did agree that there was a likelihood of reconstitution once sanctions were lifted. The Iraq Survey Team concluded that Saddam Hussein saw many benefits to an ongoing WMD program but was primarily concerned with seeing sanctions lifted. The team concluded that Saddam Hussein viewed Iran as Iraq's principal enemy in the region and that he believed WMD were necessary to counter Iran.²⁷

An important question is the extent to which the faulty NIE influenced the congressional vote on the legislation that was enacted as the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq (P.L. 107-243). The NIE made firm judgments about Iraq's *continuing* WMD programs, its links to terrorists, etc., and these judgments were reflected in the legislation.²⁸

P.L. 107-243 did not, however, focus solely on WMD; it emphasized a long pattern of Iraqi violations of U.N. resolutions and its "brutal repression of its civilian population thereby threatening international peace and security in the region." It also cited Iraq's support of terrorist organizations that "threaten the lives and security of United States citizens."²⁹ A problem for the intelligence community was the heavy emphasis on WMD programs in the public debate prior to congressional consideration of the resolution, which tended to obscure other factors that were not dependent on technical analyses of highly limited evidence.³⁰

NIE on Trends in Global Terrorism, 2006

Also instructive is the more recent NIE, *Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States*, prepared in April 2006 with the key judgments officially released in September 2006³¹ after several accounts had appeared in the media. The NIE's Key Judgments reflected the intelligence community's conclusion that the global jihadist movement "is spreading and adapting to counterterrorism efforts." The jihadists, the NIE concluded, "will use improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks focused primarily on soft targets to implement their asymmetric warfare strategy, and that they will attempt to conduct sustained terrorist attacks in urban

²⁷ See *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD with Addendums*, September 2004, Vol. I, pp. 1, 29.

²⁸ One clause of P.L. 107-243 argued that Iraq "remains in material and unacceptable breach of its international obligations by, among other things, continuing to possess and develop a significant chemical and biological weapons capability, actively seeking a nuclear weapons capability, and supporting and harboring terrorist organizations." Another clause stated: "Whereas Iraq's demonstrated capability and willingness to use weapons of mass destruction, the risk that the current Iraqi regime will either employ those weapons to launch a surprise attack against the United States or its Armed Forces or provide them to international terrorists who would do so, and the extreme magnitude of harm that would result to the United States and its citizens from such an attack, combine to justify action by the United States to defend itself."

²⁹ In addition to WMD concerns, there has been ongoing controversy on the planning for stabilizing Iraq once Saddam Hussein's military had been overcome and the regime removed; intelligence officials have maintained that estimates of the difficulties involved in this effort were accurate and were detailed prior to the commencement of hostilities. See "Intelligence and Analysis on Iraq," p. 2; also, Paul R. Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006.

³⁰ See CRS Report RS21696, *U.S. Intelligence and Policymaking: The Iraq Experience*, by (name redacted)

³¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate 'Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States' dated April 2006," http://odni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf.

environments.” Much public commentary on the NIE was directed towards its conclusions that the “Iraq conflict has become the ‘cause celebre’ for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement.”

The detailed analysis that supported these conclusions has not been made public, but it is worth noting that the NIE does give some generalized attention to policy approaches for the United States and its allies that could affect the future of jihadist terrorism.³² The NIE referred to the possibility of “greater pluralism and more responsive political systems in Muslim majority nations,” and the possibility that jihadists in Iraq will be perceived as having failed. It maintains that countering jihadists will require “coordinated multilateral efforts that go well beyond operations to capture or kill terrorist leaders.”³³

These brief references hardly exhaust the factors that will affect trends in global terrorism over the next decade. The NIE did not apparently address the question that has been the focus of much outside academic analysis—the overall religious and philosophical challenge by radical Islam to Western values.

The conclusions of this NIE may suggest a number of possible responses. Although NIEs can lay out in general terms the possible ramifications of different options, some observers believe that neither the drafters of the NIE nor the intelligence community as a whole should be viewed as best placed to propose alternative approaches for U.S. policy makers. Intelligence analysts can provide tentative assessments of the potential effect of various U.S. initiatives, but, according to this perspective, the full range of options will have to be developed elsewhere. Ultimately, policies are frequently based not only on an appreciation of the international environment and the threat, but also on the capabilities of the United States and its allies and the budgetary and political constraints that they face. These latter factors are not the responsibilities of intelligence analysts.³⁴

NIE on Prospects for Iraq’s Stability, January 2007

Responding to another congressional request, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence forwarded an NIE entitled *Prospects for Iraq’s Stability: A Challenging Road Ahead* in January 2007 with unclassified key judgments released to the public.³⁵ The Key Judgments were accompanied by several pages of text describing the NIE process and an explanation of estimative language. Changes implemented subsequent to the Intelligence Reform Act of 2004 were noted, specifically new procedures to integrate formal reviews of source reporting and technical judgments and the application of more rigorous standards. The document notes that agency heads are now required to submit “formal assessments that highlight the strengths, weaknesses, and overall credibility of their sources used in developing the critical judgments of the NIE.” In addition, a textbox is to be included in future NIEs to explain the meaning of terms such as “we

³² The NIE notes “vulnerabilities in the jihadist movement have emerged that, if fully exposed and exploited, could begin to slow the spread of the movement.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ This NIE was the subject of a joint hearing by two congressional committees in 2007; U.S. Congress, 110th Cong., 1st sess., House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services and Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Implications of the National Intelligence Estimate Regarding Al Qaeda*, July 25, 2007, published 2010.

³⁵ See http://odni.gov/press_releases/20070202_release.pdf.

judge” or “we assess” and the differences between high, moderate, and low confidence in various judgments. The use of such terms has occasionally been a source of confusion when they had come to have accepted meanings among analysts that were not well understood by policymakers.

Written at a time of intense congressional concern about the future of Iraq and in response to a congressional request, the NIE’s Key Judgments included a finding that the overall security situation in Iraq will continue to deteriorate unless serious efforts are made to reverse existing conditions. The NIE reviewed the various challenges facing the Iraqis—mutually antagonistic ethnic communities, the weakness of Iraqi Security Forces, and the extremist groups such as Al Qaeda that act as “accelerators” of the inter-sectarian struggle. The NIE maintained that “Coalition capabilities, including force levels, resources, and operations, remain an essential stabilizing element in Iraq.” Looking at the regional environment, the NIE noted that although some of Iraq’s neighbors provide support that “clearly intensifies the conflict in Iraq,” the involvement of outside actors “is not likely to be a major driver of violence or the prospects for stability because of the self-sustaining character of Iraq’s internal sectarian dynamics.” Undoubtedly, the classified NIE provides the evidentiary background of these judgments and a discussion of the extent of the intelligence community’s confidence in the NIE’s conclusions.

NIE on Iranian Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities

On December 3, 2007, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released unclassified Key Judgments of an NIE prepared in November 2007, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*.³⁶ Donald Kerr, the principal deputy DNI, stated in a covering memorandum that numerous statements based on a 2005 assessment³⁷ had been made on the record. “Since our understanding of Iran’s capabilities has changed, we felt it was important to release this information to ensure that an accurate presentation is available.”³⁸

The Key Judgments of the 2007 NIE state that “We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.” The NIE assessed that the program “was halted primarily in response to international pressure” and argued that this assessment “suggests that Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously.”³⁹

The dramatic shift in analytical conclusions received extensive attention from the media and Members of Congress given Iranian policies in the region, Iranian President Ahamdinejad’s campaign against Israel’s legitimacy, and the efforts of the U.S. and European allies to impose sanctions on Iran until it complies with United Nations Security Council demands that it cease

³⁶ Available at http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf.

³⁷ On January 18, 2007, then-DNI John Negroponte testified to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence: “Our assessment is that Tehran is determined to develop nuclear weapons. It is continuing to pursue uranium enrichment and has shown more interest in protracting negotiations than reaching an acceptable diplomatic solution.” Transcript, Hearing of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Annual Threat Assessment, http://odni.gov/testimonies/20070118_transcript.pdf.

³⁸ Statement by the Principal DNI, December 3, 2007.

³⁹ For further discussion of Iranian efforts, see CRS Report RL34544, *Iran’s Nuclear Program: Status*, by (name redacted).

uranium enrichment. A factor in the background may have been media reports that a U.S. strike against Iranian nuclear sites had been under consideration.⁴⁰ The NIE's Key Judgments did not indicate that Iran had ceased its nuclear efforts but, in the view of some observers, it undermined the urgency of the Administration's efforts.

Few would argue that the conclusions drawn by the NIE should not have been brought to the attention of policymakers in the executive branch and Congress, but a number of observers have argued that the Key Judgments overemphasized the importance of the nuclear weapon design and weaponization work at the expense of ongoing uranium conversion and enrichment efforts that would be essential to achieving nuclear weapons capabilities. Dennis Ross, a diplomat with long experience in the Middle East, noted: "While nothing has changed, the NIE has created a new story line."⁴¹ According to Ross, the NIE will unwisely focus public attention on nuclear weapons *per se* rather than Iran's larger nuclear effort. He writes:

Weaponizing is not the issue, developing fissionable materials is. Because, compared with producing fissionable material, which makes up the core of nuclear bombs, weaponizing it is neither particularly difficult nor expensive.⁴²

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger argued: "we could be witnessing not a halt of the Iranian weapons program—as the NIE asserts—but a subtle, ultimately more dangerous, version of it that will phase in the warhead when fissile material production has matured."⁴³

A focus of the Key Judgments was the assessment Iran ended its nuclear program "in fall 2003 ... primarily in response to international pressure." Observers have noted that the Key Judgments did not indicate whether such "international pressure" included the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003. It is plausible that Iranian officials, like the U.S. intelligence community, may have believed that Iraq had WMD capabilities and, when that turned out to be not the case, made a decision that their own nuclear program was no longer necessary. The released Key Judgments do not, however, address this issue.

The NIE's Key Judgments also suggest that "some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways, might—if perceived by Iran's leaders as credible—prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program." This judgment is based on an unacknowledged assumption being that Iran's goals can be accommodated by other countries, including the United States, if they are pursued without an active WMD program. This crucial issue also is not addressed in the released Key Judgments.

Iran nuclear plans remain a major concern of the intelligence community. A new NIE was prepared in early 2011 that revised some of the conclusions of the 2007 effort, but neither the NIE itself or its key judgments was made public.⁴⁴ The current DNI, James Clapper, prior to his confirmation hearing in July 2010, indicated that he would ensure that the intelligence

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Tim Shipman, "Will he Bomb ... or Is He Bluffing? George Bush Has Ramped Up the Rhetoric Against Iran. Is he Serious?," *Sunday Telegraph (London)*, September 2, 2007, p. 15.

⁴¹ Dennis Ross, "The Can't-Win Kids," *The New Republic*, December 11, 2007.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Henry A. Kissinger, "Misleading the Iran Report," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2007, p. A35.

⁴⁴ Josh Rogan, "Revised National Intelligence Estimate on Iran Is In Circulation," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2011, p. A15.

committees would be supplied with underlying intelligence reporting for the new NIE.⁴⁵ In his actual testimony, Mr. Clapper indicated his belief that there have been “substantial process improvements” in preparing NIEs. He referred specifically to efforts to assess the sources that the NIE used, the enlisting of outside readers (“red teaming”), and indications of confidence levels of the drafters in the evidence and the extent of collection gaps. Clapper acknowledged the value of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s critique of earlier NIEs: The committee “laid out exactly what went wrong. I can attest since I was there [that] it was not because of politicization or any political pressure. It was because of ineptitude.”⁴⁶

To what extent the release of the Key Judgments of the NIE changed the “story line” of U.S. policy remains uncertain.⁴⁷ Observers suggest that intelligence analysis with all its inevitable uncertainties and ambiguities seldom yields a water-tight argument for a new policy. Policy builds upon the factual base that intelligence analysis provides, but it is also built upon assessments of our own national interests that are beyond the mandate of the intelligence community. Recognizing that any Iranian success in testing a nuclear weapon in the near future would seriously undermine confidence in its core capabilities, the intelligence community has presented important evidence about current Iranian nuclear efforts. These facts do not change U.S. interests, but only how they are pursued and how they are explained to the public. Although the “story line” may have to be adjusted, the realities of U.S. interests and the failure of the Iranian regime to abide by its treaty commitments remain.⁴⁸

Conclusion: Useful Products if Limitations Appreciated

Congress is and will continue to be an important consumer of national intelligence, but there are concerns that mandating NIEs may not support the legislative process to the extent that some have anticipated. NIEs can provide the intelligence community’s best evidence and analysis on major issues of national security and can highlight areas where information is lacking, but they usually require lengthy preparation and coordination before they can be disseminated. The history of the NIE on Iraqi WMD suggests that compressing the production schedule can be counterproductive. Moreover, conclusions of NIEs may not be informed by knowledge of initiatives planned or underway by others in the executive or legislative branches. A more public role for NIEs in debates on national security policy issues could obscure their inherent limitations and distort the discussion of the policy issues.

In some cases, Congress may find intelligence assessments or briefings prepared in a less structured way and within tighter time constraints better serve its legislative needs than do formal

⁴⁵ U.S. Congress, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Additional Prehearing Questions for James R. Clapper, Jr., Upon his nomination to be Director of National Intelligence* [July 2010], p. 87.

⁴⁶ Hearing of the Senate (Select) Intelligence Committee; Subject: Nomination of Lieutenant James Clapper to be Director of National Intelligence, Federal New Service, July 20, 2010.

⁴⁷ Then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice maintains that the release of the NIE temporarily caused the Russian to back off support for sanctions against the Iranian regime. See Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers 2011), p. 628; also, pp. 617-618.

⁴⁸ For additional background on Iranian nuclear programs, see CRS Report RL34544, *Iran’s Nuclear Program: Status*, by (name redacted).

NIEs. The creation of the Office of the DNI provides a focal point from which the analytical capabilities of all intelligence agencies can be brought to bear on given issues, even ones that are narrowly focused. It is considered likely that a combination of NIEs on some topics, supplemented by more limited assessments supported by an ongoing dialogue with intelligence analysts, may provide the most effective support to the legislative process.

There appears to be some indication that Congress may be growing more inclined to seek reports from the DNI rather than NIEs. The Senate-passed version of the FY2010 Defense Authorization bill (H.R. 2647) would have required an NIE (§1071) on the nuclear aspirations of non-nuclear weapons states and non-state entities; the conference version of the same bill deleted the requirement for the NIE but asked for biennial reports given that “the conferees recognize that elements of the required report may be included in other reports prepared by the intelligence community.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Section 1240 of the FY2012 Defense Authorization bill, passed by both chambers in December 2011, requires a report from the Secretary of Defense “in coordination with the Director of National Intelligence” on Russian nuclear forces by March 2012.

The complicated history of FY2010 intelligence authorization legislation included several different requests for intelligence assessments. The House version of H.R. 2701 reported in June 2009 contained provisions for requiring an NIE on Global Supply Chain Vulnerabilities and either an NIE or a report on the intentions and capabilities of Iran, Syria, and North Korea. A manager’s amendment introduced prior to floor consideration in February 2010 changed the requirement from an NIE on the global supply chain to a “report.” These requirements were not, however, included in the Senate version that was ultimately enacted. The Senate report submitted in July 2010 stated that requirements for reports had been eliminated “in the expectation that the information required by these reports would be obtained by the congressional intelligence committees during the course of normal oversight activities. The ODNI has offered to provide the information requested in these reports in briefings or hearings.”⁵⁰ The Senate bill was incorporated in the version of H.R. 2701 that ultimately was enacted in October 2010, becoming P.L. 111-259.

NIEs are only one element of the national security decision-making process. They can outline the effects of various policy approaches in general terms, but it is unlikely that they will become the vehicles for detailed consideration of options that depend on the interrelationships of executive branch and congressional decisionmaking. NIEs will arguably be most useful when they offer a thorough assessment of a given international situation, laying out different perspectives among analysts, and providing a realistic indication of the limitations of the evidence available. However ponderous their production may be, NIEs have the advantage of reflecting formal concurrence or nonconcurrence from the heads of relevant intelligence agencies. Less formal products theoretically could allow the DNI to provide analysis without reference to the NIC and without the inclusion of “alternate views held by elements of the intelligence community” that are statutorily required in the case of NIEs.

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, 111th Cong., 1st sess., House of Representatives, Committee of Conference, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010*, H.Rept. 111-288, October 7, 2009, p. 810.

⁵⁰ U.S. Congress, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Intelligence Authorization Act for FY2010*, S.Rept. 111-223, July 19, 2010, p. 65.

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