RESEARCH SHORT

IMAGE FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

(Re)defining Warning

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This *Research Short* looks to reignite debate on how the IC defines warning and several terms associated with it in the context of intelligence. The term has been used inconsistently over time and across intelligence organizations, and past definitions have often presented limited views of the concept. To ground the discussion, this *Short* will note problems arising from how the IC has defined the term across history and then identify key themes that distinguish warning as a distinct intelligence discipline. It will then propose two definitions of warning for consideration by intelligence practitioners and scholars as part of an ongoing research effort.

One of the IC's core responsibilities is to provide warning, and the notion of intelligence failure is often associated with a failure to warn.[1, 2] Although the IC has long recognized the need for a comprehensive definition of warning as a means to improve performance, coming up with one has been challenging. A lexicon that is inconsistent, unclear, or contested can affect not just intelligence production and organization, but also how decisionmakers perceive and evaluate warnings.[3] For example, intelligence scholars have noted issues caused by multiple interpretations of the term "strategic,"[4] which when applied to warning can affect interpretations of what a "strategic warning issue" is, what "strategic warning" entails, and who is responsible for it. Warning is more likely to be effective when there is a more universal understanding, on the part of both the IC and decisionmakers, of what warning entails. As part of the National Intelligence University fellowship program, this analysis proposes a solution to this issue by applying a Grounded Theory approach to the discipline of warning (see inset).

Historical Definitions of Warning— The Strategic/Tactical Dichotomy

Intelligence definitions of warning during the IC's early years and throughout the Cold War equated the term warning with strategic warning, explicitly viewing strategic warning as a *function of intelligence* and tactical warning as a *function of operational warfighters*.[5] Warning—not using, but implying the qualifier strategic—was a notification the IC "might provide prior to an actual attack, and hopefully while preparations for the attack are still in progress,"[6] while tactical warning was "a notification that the enemy has initiated hostilities," which could occur "at any time from the launching of an attack until it reaches its target."[7] This framework made sense given that the overarching Cold War threat to U.S. national security was a massive nuclear strike by one or all elements of the Soviet nuclear triad. The intelligence-operations divide and equating warning with strategic warning were laid out in the 1979 Director of Central Intelligence Directive 1/5, "National Intelligence Warning," which defined warning as a function of intelligence that "includes strategic, but not tactical warning."[8] This distinction continued beyond the Cold War, and at least one contemporary exploration of warning equates the term with strategic warning.[9, 10, 11]

KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- Warning is more likely to be effective when there is a common understanding, by both intelligence officers and decisionmakers, of what it means.

- A core lexicon of warning must: account for the full scope of the mission, be timely, reduce surprise, be explicitly communicated, and persuade decisionmakers.

GROUNDED THEORY

This *Research Short* presents preliminary findings from an exploration of warning using Grounded Theory—an iterative, qualitative research methodology employed when the theory about a phenomenon is insufficient. This can be when relationships between or definitions of concepts are not elaborated fully, or when a fuller framework is needed to understand the phenomenon.

For this research project's first phase, the grounded theory practice of preliminary and axial coding was applied to key documents from the warning literature to create 227 coded entries and 169 unique codes sorted into 29 categories across four broad concepts. These codes, categories, and concepts were then evaluated for their *theoretical significance*, which does not necessarily correlate to the number of times a code appears. Analyzing data with an emphasis on identifying codes, concepts, and ideas links the theory in ways that may not otherwise be apparent from a standard reading or analysis of an issue.

Throughout the scholarly and policy literature on warning, the term has seldom been defined without clearly differentiating between its strategic and tactical elements. That differentiation has varied over time, however. Most interpretations, particularly those in DoD publications and views, have made a temporal distinction, and over time the idea of "operational warning" has entered the DoD lexicon to try to create a middle ground—paralleling DoD's concept of the three levels of war.[12, 13, 14] More contemporary views of strategic warning have longer timelines—both specific ranges, such as "six months to two years,"[15] and broader characterizations, such as "months to years"—while tactical warning is more immediate, described as occurring "days to weeks" from the realization of a threat.[16]

Other interpretations define strategic warning as a broad assessment of the threat landscape and tactical warning as dealing with specific incidents,[17, 18] or they distinguish the two based on the availability of resources to deal with a threat.[19] Still others differentiate strategic warning based on the scope, scale, or effects of the threat or the seniority of the intended recipient of the warning.[20, 21]

Historical Interpretations of Warning—Core Characteristics

In addition to the distinction between strategic and tactical warning, three major themes recur throughout warning definitions and writings: warning is (1) a communication, (2) the communication must be timely, and (3) it must be persuasive or convincing to reduce surprise and enable decisions. Cynthia Grabo, one of the earliest and most influential warning scholars, has said that "It is an axiom of warning that warning does not exist until it has been conveyed to the policymaker, *and that he must know that he has been warned.*" [emphasis added][22] Even after the Cold War, warning has been consistently emphasized as a communication,[23, 24, 25] and the Defense Warning Network, in all four editions of its handbook since its inception in 2012, defines warning as a "distinct" communication.[26]

Warning must also be "timely"[27, 28] or "given in sufficient time,"[29] which means that warning must be delivered so as to allow decisionmakers the time to act to prevent or otherwise mitigate damage before a threat occurs. In a 2017 interview, former National Intelligence Officer for Warning John Bird said "warning that comes too late is not warning, it is entertainment."[30] The broader literature on warning, however, notes that warning too early can be equally problematic, leading to the "boy who cried wolf" phenomenon.[31, 32, 33, 34] The emphasis on warning being neither too early nor too late is linked directly to the imperative to prevent surprise (i.e., don't warn too late) and to prompt decisions (i.e., don't warn so early that options or counteractions are not feasible or available).

Warning is often described by the need to be convincing and persuasive in its presentation to reduce surprise and enable decisions and counteractions.[35, 36, 37, 38] This view draws on an interpretation of surprise as "the sudden realization that one has been operating on the basis of an erroneous threat perception,"[39] thus finding oneself unprepared in not having taken potentially preventative or preparatory measures. By apprising decisionmakers of the nature of a threat,

intelligence enables them to take the actions needed to prevent or prepare for that threat, assuming the warning comes in time to make and then execute a decision. Persuasion is often used to contrast the purpose of warning with other intelligence pursuits, which seek primarily to inform.[40]

These Historical Definitions Are Problematic

Trends within warning definitions during the past 60 years provide valuable insight into the nature of the warning mission. They also contain, however, problematic elements that future lexicons would be wise to either reframe or remove.

The first problematic element is specifying timeframes. Although time and timing are vital to understanding and developing a full theory or framework on warning, the lexicon should not include specific timeframes—six months to two years[41]—generalized timeframes—months to years[42]—or vague terms such as "imminent." Within the warning mission, time and timing are highly relative both in how individual problems play out and in what decisionmakers consider to be timely warning. Warning of and responding to a military attack may occur over a period of months, while warning about emerging technologies or demographic trends may involve decisions on research, investment, and budgeting that must be made and executed years in advance. This problem has become more pronounced as the breadth of national security threats has expanded to include cyber, disruptive technologies, malign influence, pandemics, and proliferation—which vary significantly in how quickly they mature and, therefore, the lead time needed for warning. Additionally, some threat responses might be made by individuals with delegated responsibility, while others may require time to gain consensus or negotiate. Rather than include specified timeframes in definitions or frameworks, practitioners of warning would be better served by exploring and understanding how time relates to specific threat scenarios or classes of threats (e.g., military attacks versus political instability, cyber attacks, or proliferation). At a minimum, knowing what constitutes timely warning requires understanding both how quickly the threat might develop and where the responding policymakers' decision points are.

The second problematic issue in the warning lexicon involves defining and differentiating among strategic, tactical, and operational warning. For many reasons, strategic and tactical are best used as relative terms to provide direction in scoping analysis (i.e., "we need to think more strategically" or "we need to focus on more tactical decisions") rather than absolute categories of time or threats. The terms can lead to fruitless debates over what counts as a strategic threat, for example, whether the 9/11 attacks or the Colonial Pipeline attack should be considered strategic threats.[43, 44, 45]

More important, differentiating between strategic and tactical warning has the potential to create unnecessary administrative and territorial arguments. Organizations can use these definitions and any timelines associated with them to lay claim to mission areas or to avoid inconvenient tasks. If we define strategic warning as involving issues that are six months to two years from occurring, then it becomes possible to dismiss issues not assessed to fall inside that timeframe. Differentiating between strategic and tactical warning also establishes an

artificial seam or gap between missions, as threats transition from long-term concerns to more immediate crises. The term strategic, in particular, can be used to imply importance or hierarchal dominance. This is especially pronounced when strategic warning is defined as providing warning to a nation's most senior leadership,[46, 47] or when it may be considered more important or useful than other types of warning.[48]

When considered in its entirety, the IC has a responsibility to provide warning along the entire spectrum of threats, in both scope and time, to decisionmakers across the full spectrum of government and military functions. This means providing strategic warning to operational or tactical planning teams across the government, as well as providing tactical warning to national decisionmakers who need to make time-critical decisions.

Critical Elements for a Comprehensive Warning Lexicon

So, what should be included in a core warning lexicon? Grounded theory research argues it should be those concepts or elements that have key ***theoretical significance*** to warning. A preliminary grounded theory analysis of existing warning doctrine, policies, and literature identifies at least five concepts significant enough to be included in a core lexicon:

1. The Complete Nature of the Warning Mission: Warning occurs across a broad spectrum and includes multiple implied tasks. Differentiating between strategic and tactical warning seeks to account for this notion, but those terms—as noted above—are not theoretically significant and can be potentially problematic. The theoretically important elements are the implied missions: identifying emerging threats, exploring future scenarios, prioritizing threats, and detecting when dormant or lower priority issues may begin to transition to crisis.

2. Warning Must Be Timely: Although specific timeframes are problematic, the notion that warning must be timely is critical to any lexicon. Warning must provide decisionmakers the space and time to orient and decide whether and how to act.

3. Warning Counters Surprise: The notion of surprise, including the traumatic psychological effects it can produce, is one of the most theoretically significant terms in warning. By focusing on reducing surprise, warning seeks to ensure that when a threat is realized, decisionmakers are not unprepared, having failed to take preventative or preparatory measures they otherwise would have.

4. Warning as an Explicit Communication: Collection and analysis are elements of successful warning, but warning cannot occur unless that information and analysis are explicitly communicated to a decisionmaker with the authority or capability, direct or indirect, to affect action.

5. The Need To Convince or Persuade Decisionmakers: Warning's unique purpose is not simply to provide information or situational awareness, but even more to persuade, to convince, or to "make it stick."[49]

Proposed Core Definitions for the Warning Mission

It is difficult, if not impossible, to account for these five theoretically significant elements in a single definition, and so two core lexicon terms are proposed here: the definition of warning as a mission and the definition of warning as a communication.

> **Mission**: Warning is the process through which the Intelligence Community identifies, characterizes, monitors, and persuasively communicates threats to national interests with sufficient time to enable policy, planning, allocation, or operational responses to minimize the incidence and effects of surprise.

> **Communication**: A warning is an explicit communication about a potentially adverse change in the threat environment and its associated risk to U.S. and allied interests so as to persuade or convince decisionmakers, or their principal advisers, of the nature of the threat and prompt an informed decision.

Rather than detaching strategic from tactical warning, redefining warning as a mission incorporates the spectrum of implied warning missions (identifying, characterizing, and monitoring threats) into a single definition that covers both the emerging and enduring natures of threats across all timelines. This definition seeks to enumerate the variety of actions that can be taken in response to a warning and charges that the warning be timely to enable those actions. Some responses may be taken unilaterally, immediately, and with available assets, resources, and plans. Others may require building consensus to initiate planning, allocate resources, or develop a new project, plan, or capability—all of which may involve their own time-consuming processes.

Defining warning as a *mission* emphasizes the objective of reducing surprise. Although this might appear to be a trivial inclusion, easily omitted with no impact to the definition, it is potentially the most important element in distinguishing warning from other routine intelligence functions. The imperative to reduce surprise reinforces two ideas. First, it reminds us that the threat landscape is always changing. Surprise can occur when we are unaware of emerging—and emergent—threats, or when benign threats turn malignant. This includes changes to the international threat environment that deviate from our analytic lines. Second, it reminds us that our understanding or analysis of the world may be fundamentally incorrect, requiring us to continually reevaluate our assumptions, challenge analytic lines, and explore alternative scenarios or interpretations.

Defining warning as a *communication* emphasizes that the action must be explicit and targeted toward a decisionmaker to enable a response. The word targeted is intentional. Targeted communications are directed, possibly through an adviser or intermediary, at the specific individual or office with the responsibility and authority to take relevant action. This does not require new intelligence product lines or tools, but to be successful, warning cannot rely on the hope that a decisionmaker "gets the message" or that a product might serve "as a warning." Finally, this definition of warning as a communication specifically notes a change in the threat environment, implying the decisionmaker's threat perception must likewise adapt, and it

confronts the challenge inherent in updating those perceptions by noting that the communication must persuade or otherwise convince.

What these definitions do not do, unfortunately, is address the fundamental paradox implied between the need to convince or persuade and the fundamental tenet of the U.S. IC that it does not engage in policy prescription. Simply put, how forcefully should we work to convince decisionmakers, and if the decision made is not to act or to otherwise defer decision, then did the IC successfully warn? If success in warning means that an action is taken to preempt, prevent, or prepare for a threat, then does successfully warning imply that the IC is advocating for an action, even if not a specific course of action? A failure to effectively persuade a decisionmaker leaves the IC open to a retort reputedly issued by former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, "You warned me, but you didn't convince me."[50]

A Call To Discussion and Debate

The definitions proposed here are based on a qualitative analysis of the intelligence and academic literature on warning in pursuit of a better theory or framework. Thus, this *Research Short* seeks to stimulate discussion and elicit feedback on these terms. Do these definitions fail to capture other core elements of warning? Is there a contradiction between the need to persuade and the IC's objective nature? If so, what are the implications for the intersection between intelligence and policy regarding warning? Responses to this Catalyst will help shape ongoing NIU research and affect future findings and recommendations for the IC.

Definitions do not provide a full framework of warning, they only capture a fraction of theoretically relevant concepts, terms, and relationships that exist in the broad warning mission. A future *Research Short* will propose a more comprehensive framework to differentiate between the components of the warning mission (i.e., identifying, characterizing, monitoring, and communicating threats) and how those components interact in today's challenging operational environment with theoretically important concepts such as time, timing, and surprise.

In the meantime, the lexicon proposed here provides the IC with a refreshed starting point from which to reattack the challenge of creating a common IC framework. It is a necessary mission, even if it is one that is often viewed as a third rail, sacred cow, or boondoggle at best.

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If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at **Research@niu.odni.gov**.

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