What real need is there for this other than a gendarme in the world, and what has the real cost of that been and will continue to be?

Another Intelligence Image Faces Change

CIA Chief Mulls Consolidating Analysis of Spy Satellite Pictures

By Walter Pincus
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The sophisticated system of U.S. spy satellites produces more images than can be processed and analyzed as quickly as intelligence officials want, congressional and administration sources say.

Faced with what one key official described as the need to decide whether to collect less or analyze more, the intelligence community has decided it must upgrade its processing operations.

CIA Director John M. Deutch is studying a plan to consolidate the image analysis operations of the numerous military and intelligence agencies that order the satellite pictures.

Now, every day at 3 p.m. in the first floor of a windowless building in Northern Virginia, a dozen people representing individual organizations in the intelligence community sit around a conference table and decide which targets the spy satellites should focus on during the next 24 hours.

The targets are passed to officials at the National Reconnaissance Office, whose staff controls the four or five sophisticated electro-optical and radar satellites that race around the world in low orbits.

Each spy satellite spends just minutes over target areas, a senior intelligence official said. Bosnia is targeted every day now but other targets are studied as demanded.

Increasingly efficient electronic cameras on satellites are covering the growing target list. But most of the equipment that disseminates the satellite photos "is not up to date," according to a former top manager of the system.

A senior intelligence official conceded during a recent interview that "our capacity to collect [imagery from space] outstrips our ability to analyze."

The 1991 Persian Gulf War ex-

posed "the huge processing and analytical problem that exists when the imagery product must be sent to where it's needed on a battlefield or for a policymaker," former CIA director Robert M. Gates said in a recent interview.

As a result, Deutch is studying whether to consolidate elements from 11 military and civilian intelligence agencies that do their own imagery analysis. The proposed National Imagery Office (NIO), expected to be announced in the next month, would gather together more than 10,000 military and civilian employees, including the entire Defense Mapping Agency and the CIA's National Photo Interpretation Center (NPIC).

Three years ago, Gates tried a similar consolidation but met with resistance from the Pentagon. In 1992 he settled for the creation of the Central Imagery Office (CIO), a much smaller organization that coordinates the multiagency demands for imagery collection.

The proposed NIO would have analytical elements of CIO plus imagery elements from the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Defense Airborne Reconnaissance Office (which controls unmanned vehicles used to take battlefield photos), the imagery analysts maintained by the separate services and the joint staff and similar elements based in worldwide military commands.

Deutch, who, when he was deputy secretary of defense controlled the Pentagon's spy satellite operations, is pushing the consolidation because he believes that advances in technology will permit the space images to be digitalized, entered in computers, manipulated and sent from point to point electronically for use by different intelligence users.

One goal, Deutch said in a recent speech, would be "to provide the military commander" so much information so quickly that U.S. forces will have "a unique 'dominant battlefield awareness.' " That means U.S. forces will "know better than their adversary what's happening on the ground, water or air around them," the senior intelligence official said.

In addition, the official said, many of the Pentagon's newly developed precision guided weapons are targeted by images and require rapid transmission of ground information for units on the battlefield.

The House Permanent Select Intelligence Committee added $2 million to the CIO's fiscal 1996 budget to finance a study of "all national and theater imagery collection platforms, all types of imagery products" and "all imagery exploitation software packages to better support targeting of precision weapons," according to the panel's report.

Proponents hope the NIO would make it easier to coordinate among the various agencies that analyze the data and develop computerized image-reading equipment that could be used for map makers and intelligence analysts. The two groups now get their information separately.

Eventually, officials said, they hope to replace humans with equipment that would be able to detect changes between the previous images and the current image and highlight those differences.

Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), the vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, suggested in a recent floor discussion that to cut costs the government should permit U.S. companies that developed NRO's one-meter space imagery and imaging systems to sell them commercially as an inducement for them to work on the "needed image analysis equipment which could simultaneously answer the needs of intelligence analysts looking for evidence of weapons on the ground and the needs of radiologists looking for evidence of tumors in mammograms."

The Defense Mapping Agency's activities illustrate one measure of the change expected from the digitalization of imagery. Today, according to the senior intelligence official, 90 percent of what the mapping agency does is on paper and 10 percent is digital. "Their new goal is 70 percent digital and 30 percent paper."

One former CIA official said the agency's clandestine operators and photo analysts worry that a consolidation could reduce the close controls they have exercised over satellite coverage. But an intelligence official said those worries are misplaced.

During Cold War days, for example, the CIA would order detailed satellite pictures of Moscow to plot out drops where agents could pick up secret messages, according to a former operations officer. Or when the communists were thought to be infiltrating guerrillas into East African countries, CIA officers could make a "critical" request to "send a bird over Ethiopia to see what was going on," he added.

"We got the raw film, processed it and our analysts read it with enormous skill," he said.

Under the new system, CIA's analysts would be part of NIO, a senior intelligence official said, but the clandestine service case officers would still order and receive the data they need just as quickly as before and on their own computers.