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CIA Director John Brennan considering sweeping organizational changes

By Greg Miller
11/19/2014

CIA Director John Brennan is considering sweeping organizational changes that could include breaking up the separate spying and analysis divisions that have been in place for decades to create hybrid units focused on individual regions and threats to U.S. security, current and former U.S. intelligence officials said.

The proposal would essentially replicate the structure of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center and other similar entities in the agency — an idea that reflects the CTC's expanded role and influence since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

U.S. officials emphasized that the proposal is in its preliminary stages, and could still be scaled back or even discarded. Already the idea has encountered opposition from current and former officials who have voiced concern that it would be too disruptive and might jeopardize critical capabilities and expertise.

But if Brennan moves forward, officials said, the changes would be among the most ambitious in CIA history — potentially creating individual centers focused on China, Latin America and other regions or issues for which personnel are now dispersed across different parts of the agency.

“It’s a major deal,” said a former senior CIA official who has worked with Brennan. Asked for an example of a previous reorganization that was similar in scale, he replied, “I don’t think there has been one.”

Brennan appointed an internal CIA committee in September to evaluate the proposal as part of a broader review of the agency’s structure. In a message to the agency’s workforce, he cited the “rising number and complexity of security issues” such as the continued threat of al-Qaeda, civil war in Syria and Russia’s incursions in Ukraine.

“I have become increasingly convinced that the time has come to take a fresh look at how we are organized as an agency and at whether our current structure, and ways of doing business, need adjustment,” the message said, according to portions that were obtained by The Post.

Brennan did not delineate any specific plans, but he expressed concern that existing divisions undermine the CIA’s effectiveness at a time when “the need for integration has never been greater” and more of the agency’s missions “cut across our organizational boundaries.”

Former officials said Brennan’s interest in organizational change is driven in part by frustration with the struggle to strengthen U.S. intelligence on the crisis in Syria, which has morphed from a civil war to an incubator for terrorist groups.

CIA spokesman Dean Boyd said the in-house panel was asked to conduct a wide-ranging review and is expected to report back with “recommendations on whether any changes should be made and, if so, what needs to be done.” The review is ongoing, Boyd said, and “the officers have not yet put forth their findings.”

CIA veterans, including several who have met with the panel, affirmed that it was given wide latitude with no expectation that it would endorse Brennan’s idea. Nevertheless, they said the panel’s work is clearly centered on evaluating the major realignment envisioned by Brennan.

“This definitely started with a vision he had,” said a former senior U.S. intelligence official who worked with Brennan. Like others, the former official spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying he was not authorized to discuss internal CIA deliberations.

At issue is a basic structure that has been in place since the agency’s inception, with employees divided by function among four major directorates. The best known are the National Clandestine Service, which sends case officers overseas on spying missions and carries out covert operations, and the Directorate of Intelligence, which employs thousands of analysts whose main job is to provide insight on global developments to President Obama and other policymakers. Others include a directorate focused on science and technology, and a fourth handles logistics for operations abroad.

Many of the agency’s components have been reorganized and renamed repeatedly. The Directorate of Intelligence, for example, was almost completely revamped during the early 1980s to eliminate offices that focused on politics and economics, replacing them with units modeled on the geographic divisions used in the clandestine service. But the idea being explored by Brennan would go beyond such changes, rebuilding its sprawling bureaucracy around a model that relies on “centers” that combine analysts, operators, scientists and support staff. The agency

has for years employed that approach on its most daunting assignments, including efforts to slow the spread of narcotics, illicit weapons and nuclear arms.

The trend has accelerated over the past decade, embodied by the massive growth of the Counterterrorism Center. With thousands of employees, a presence in dozens of countries and its own fleet of armed drones, the CTC, as it is known, has come to be regarded as an agency unto itself.

Many attribute the CTC's success against al-Qaeda to its fusion of disciplines, with analysts who have detailed knowledge of terrorist networks working directly with the operators charged with dismantling them.

“It is a formula that has worked to create focus and extraordinary energy” against al-Qaeda and other important targets, said former CIA director Michael V. Hayden, who recently met with Brennan's committee to discuss the reorganization plans. “The challenge is organizing the entire agency along those lines.”

Hayden said he warned the panel against going too far in dismantling the directorates without having a clear plan for how the agency will replace what they have done for decades: recruit and train analysts and case officers with highly specialized skills, cultivating careers and expertise with a focus on the long term.

Hybrid organizations such as the CTC tend to be “consumed with the operational challenges of the moment,” Hayden said. “But you also have to pay attention to creating the basic skills, knowledge and databases” — areas of tradecraft that have been the domain of traditional directorates.

Others cited additional concerns, including the potential for analysts' judgment to be clouded by working so closely with the operations side. “The potential for corruption is much greater,” said a former U.S. intelligence official who worked at the CTC. “If you have analysts who are directly involved in helping to guide operations, there is the possibility for them to get too close to the issue and be too focused on trying to achieve a certain outcome.”

Still, several CIA veterans said that risk can be managed and more than offset by other advantages that come from melding analysts with operatives. Doing so can give analysts deeper understanding of the motivations and reliability of sources. Trained to be skeptics, analysts can also help case officers see flaws in operational plans.

Such collaboration proved critical in the search for Osama bin Laden and has given rise to an expanding career category for analysts known as “targeters” who help identify individuals for the clandestine service to recruit, apprehend or, in extreme cases, kill.

Agency veterans, however, have been divided on whether creating new centers would lead to meaningful intelligence gains on more traditional subjects including Russia and China.

Boyd declined to identify who had been appointed by Brennan to the panel, or even say how many people were on it. Others said it includes about a dozen senior CIA executives from across its directorates. It is “a cross section of senior officers,” a U.S. official said.

In addition to Hayden, the group has met with other former high-ranking CIA officials including former acting director Michael Morell and former deputy director Stephen Kappes. Both declined requests for comment.