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Essay by Trevor Findlay, University of Melbourne

The IAEA's Organizational Culture: Realities and Myths

In his classic work *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein, the guru of organizational culture studies, identifies three levels of culture, “from the very tangible overt manifestations that one can see and feel to the deeply embedded, unconscious, basic assumptions.”¹ He designates these as artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts are an organization’s visible structure, processes, and symbols. Espoused values are those that an organization publicly proclaims. Underlying assumptions are those unlikely to be articulated publicly, but taken for granted as ‘the way we do things around here.’

One of the key cultural artifacts of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is its official self-description as: “An independent, intergovernmental, science and technology-based organization in the United Nations system that serves as the global focal point for nuclear cooperation.”² This slogan reflects several espoused values that the Agency holds dear. Probing deeper reveals that these do not completely accord either with the reality of the IAEA’s situation or the underlying assumptions of its organizational culture.

The first element of the Agency’s self-description, its declaration of ‘independence,’ does not mean independence from its member states (although this is sometimes hinted at), but from other parts of the wider United Nations system. This dates to negotiations on the IAEA Statute, during which the United States and its allies pressed for the Agency to be master of its own destiny or, more cynically, one controlled by a Western-dominated Board. They clearly wished to avoid the fate of the short-lived UN Atomic Energy Commission, which was established by and beholden to the majority-ruled UN General Assembly.

Certainly the Agency has its own independent governance system, comprising its Board of Governors and the General Conference. While it reports annually to the UN General Assembly, that body can only make non-binding recommendations about the Agency’s work. Unlike the specialized agencies—and this is a source of considerable pride—the IAEA does not answer to, nor is it ‘coordinated’ by, the hapless UN Economic and Social Council.

But the Agency is not truly independent, even within the UN system and certainly not from its most powerful member states. Crucially, it is not independent of the UN Security Council, which has primary responsibility for international peace and security. The Council can and has given the Agency binding instructions which the IAEA has had little or no influence in crafting, as in the non-compliance cases of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. At most, the IAEA could be said, like the specialized agencies, to be autonomous, that is self-governing. Paradoxically, the specialized agencies have often acted as independently as the IAEA claims to be, their directors perceiving themselves as “operating their own fiefdoms.”³

¹ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 25.

² IAEA Mission Statement, <http://www.iaea.org/About/mission.html>.

³ Margaret P. Karns and Karen A. Mingst. *International Organizations: the Politics and Processes of Global Governance*. 2nd ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010), 116.

A second element of the Agency's self-description, its scientific and technical orientation, is used to reinforce its claim to independence. It undoubtedly derives from general wonderment at the potential of atomic technology during the 1950s when the Agency was founded; the explicit terms of its statutory mission "to accelerate and enlarge the contribution of atomic energy to peace, health and prosperity throughout the world;"⁴ and the preponderance of nuclear scientists, engineers, and heads of national nuclear agencies among its founding fathers. The 20-year tenure of Sigvard Eklund, a distinguished Swedish physicist, as second Director General indelibly solidified the scientific orientation of the Agency. Such an orientation bolstered the Agency's claim to be impartial and apolitical, especially when judging member states' compliance with their safeguards agreements. A concomitant expressed value was the much lauded 'Spirit of Vienna'—the notion that the Board's governors, some of whom in the early days were nuclear scientists, were united in seeking consensus on what was objectively and apolitically best for the Agency, not what their own governments necessarily desired.

This characterization of the Agency became increasingly difficult to maintain as the IAEA necessarily confronted high-profile, controversial non-compliance cases. After U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice criticized Director General Mohamed ElBaradei's diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iran issue on the grounds that "The IAEA is not in the business of diplomacy. [It] is a technical agency," he responded: "I don't sit here and feel I'm only a technician. I owe it to the international community to give them my advice. They don't have to take it."⁵ The widely observed 'politicization' of the Board of Governors, especially since the Iraq and Iran cases arose, has been a challenge to the self-proclaimed scientific culture of the IAEA, especially since outside observers often make no distinction between the decisions and activities of the Board and those of the Secretariat. As for the Spirit of Vienna, it was always partly a cultural myth. The Board has always been deeply divided over safeguards, the membership of Israel (and for a time of South Africa), and the funding of technical cooperation for developing countries.

A final notable element of the Agency's self-description, "the global focal point for nuclear cooperation," implies that the IAEA is the true keeper of the nuclear file for the international community and the key global governance institution in the nuclear field. It was on these grounds that the IAEA in 1991 asserted its right to manage nuclear inspections in Iraq after the UN Security Council came perilously close to depriving it of that role in favour of the upstart UN Special Commission. In the later Libya case the Agency asserted its prerogative to verify Libya's declared nuclear capabilities in opposition to the attempt by the United Kingdom and the United States to exclude it until the case was essentially closed. More recently, the Long-Term Strategic Plan (2012-2023) of the Safeguards Department enjoins the Department to work towards ensuring that "The IAEA is recognized as the pre-eminent international nuclear verification agency."⁶

⁴ Article II, IAEA Statute, 1957.

⁵ Quoted in Roula Khalaf and James Blitz, "IAEA chief embraces the eye of the storm," *Financial Times*, 2 October 2007, <https://www.ft.com/content/82e44078-711d-11dc-98fc-0000779fd2ac>, accessed 15 November 2016.

⁶ IAEA, Department of Safeguards, Safeguards Strategic Plan Summary, [https://www.iaea.org/safeguards/symposium/2014/images/pdfs/LongTerm_Strategic_Plan_\(20122023\)-Summary.pdf](https://www.iaea.org/safeguards/symposium/2014/images/pdfs/LongTerm_Strategic_Plan_(20122023)-Summary.pdf), 2.

An underlying, largely unspoken, cultural assumption that derives from the Agency's self-description is that it is special, *sui generis*, and a cut above other UN-type organizations. Not only does it deal with high matters of state concerning international security, but it is presumed to be more effective, efficient and impartial than what it perceives as the more politicized, even venal and certainly inefficient parts of the UN system—notably the specialized agencies. As Hans Blix, the third Director General, once put it:

It is worth recalling that the IAEA occupies a special place amongst organizations in the United Nations family in that part of its work is directly related to peace and security in the world through verification of commitments by States to use nuclear material and installations exclusively for peaceful purposes. It has direct access to the Security Council and it reports directly each year to the General Assembly.⁷

Such sentiments have been reinforced over the years by successive Directors General; by outside assessments, notably by UN panels, periodic international disarmament commissions, and U.S. Congressional bodies; and by governments arguing for an exemption for the Agency from UN-wide financial strictures.

Yet to the outside observer the IAEA looks like just another UN body. The Agency's logo is UN blue and duplicates the laurel wreath of the UN's logo. The Agency is located at the Vienna International Centre along with other UN organizations. Its staff, like all other UN bodies, is multinational and its diplomatic and bureaucratic procedures replicate those of the UN broadly, with all their advantages and disadvantages. There is broad agreement that it is one of the more effective and efficient of the UN organizations, but not spectacularly so.

An even deeper underlying, unspoken assumption of the IAEA Secretariat is that the espoused values reflected in its self-description are not just ends in themselves but vital in warding off political 'interference' from member states and from other parts of the UN system that at several points in its history have threatened its well-being. As Barnett and Coleman have noted, international organizations' secretariats seek to "further their mandate as defined by their professional training and expert knowledge, protect their autonomy, and minimize organizational insecurity." Such claims often turn on "the belief that they are impersonal and neutral, that is, that they are *not* exercising power but instead are using depoliticized, objective criteria to fashion their policies."⁸ Much of the IAEA's organizational culture can be seen as just such an attempt to protect its operational autonomy and minimize threats to its well-being and advancement—all in the service of better global nuclear governance of course.

⁷ "Preface by the Director General," *International Atomic Energy Agency: Personal Reflections*. Vienna, IAEA, 1997.

⁸ Michael Barnett and Liv Coleman, "Designing Police: Interpol and the Study of Change in International Organizations," *International Studies Quarterly* 49:4 (December 2005): 595. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2005.00380.x>.