

The Importance of Intelligence to International Security

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At the state level, intelligence may help to save lives; at the international, it can provide, or be used to provide, the pretext to go to war, and hence cost lives (Gill & Phythian, 2006, p. 172). The events of the past decades – 9/11, Iraq 2003 and, most recently, the 7/7 bombings in London – indicate that intelligence structures and processes are still not error-free. Historically, intelligence has been subject to a particular group of insiders, and there is no denying that much intelligence work must take place in secret if it is to be of value. However, intelligence is too significant to be left to the spooks. Therefore this essay will analyse the importance of intelligence to international security. Firstly, it will shed light upon the controversial concept of intelligence distinguishing it from simple ‘information’ and bogus spy stories. Secondly, two questions will be raised: whether intelligence agencies are still needed today; and, if so, is there such a thing as ‘international intelligence’. Thirdly, the role of intelligence in influencing state policies will be analysed as well as its engagement in ‘covert action’ followed by a brief presentation of 2003 Iraq’s case. Lastly, final conclusions will be drawn, together with an evaluation of intelligence’ future role.

At the beginning of the XXI century, there is still no widely established definition of intelligence (Warner, 2009, p. 6) as each author draws upon his/her personal experience. Mark Lowenthal (2002), in his textbook on intelligence and policy, suggests that the word ‘intelligence’ can be analysed in three different ways. First, as a process, of collecting, analysing and delivering to the ‘consumers’ such as policy makers or operational commanders. This is often called as the ‘intelligence cycle’, although the essence of this cycle is now widely controversial (Hulnick, 2006). Second, as a product, formerly circulated as paper, but now distributed through multilevel secure electronic databases. Finally, we can talk of intelligence services and intelligence communities as institutions. As their name suggests, they often deliver various ‘services’ to the government and increasingly this involves active efforts to shape the world as well as merely reporting about it (Lowenthal, 2002, p. 8). It is now obvious that the task to define ‘intelligence’ and its importance is not an easy one; therefore, the final notion will be presented at the end of this essay.

It must also be noted that ‘information’ and ‘intelligence’ are two different terms: the latter is produced by a process of analysis or evaluation of the former (Odom, 2008, p. 323). Collecting information can be separated in two methods: either openly through the review of already published material (newspapers, radio, periodicals, trade, political, economic and military journals, as well as internet sources) and relatively passive ‘environmental scanning’ (‘overt’); or through more aggressive techniques of penetrating the secrecy and privacy of others (‘covert’). Intelligence or information comes from a variety of concealed sources such as human spies, defence attaché and diplomatic reporting, intercepted communications and signals and satellite imagery. These clandestine means are used to ‘steal’ information that potentially hostile nation-states or trans-national terrorist groups want to hide (Russel, 2007, p. 190).

Often, the business of intelligence is surrounded in myth that is created by the production spy novels and movies such as James Bond. Most people imagine that intelligence work focuses on foreign intelligence agencies managing espionage and covert missions against real or imagined enemies. Because intelligence belongs to the realm of international relations, there is no surprise that probably the best-known intelligence agencies in the world are the US’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), MI6 in the UK, and the defunct Soviet KGB (Andrew, 2004). The first two gather information regarding threats to national interest and supervise operations to pre-empt or disrupt these threats (terrorism, proliferation and organized crime). However, one of the paradoxes facing those countries wealthy enough to maintain a variety of different intelligence agencies collecting information by different technical (SIGINT) and

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human methods (HUMINT) is how to make sense of the masses of information and possible competing analyses that result (Dupont, 2003). We will now move on to the second part of the essay to analyse the need of such services in an international arena.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the need of further intelligence services was questioned (Hughes, 2011). Before that time, it was the responsibility of intelligence agencies to identify threats. Without an adequately severe threat, a risk of being abandoned arises for the agencies themselves, as they become less needed. Besides, regardless of the large financial resources, the world's most high-profile intelligence agency, the CIA, has failed to foresee the coming of important events and major calamities: building of the Berlin Wall, fall of the Soviet Union, 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or the 2003 unsuccessful Western invasion of Iraq. Naturally, a question that arises is whether the extensive spending on intelligence has actually made a difference. Military historian John Keegan has claimed that the importance of intelligence in warfare has been overrated (Keegan, 2003, pp. 383-4) while others suggest that operations and maintenance of the US intelligence services is nothing more than a highly successful confidence trick (Gill & Phythian, 2006, p. 16).

It is obvious that states rely on both internal and external security for their welfare; however, most attention has been concentrated on external intelligence in handling international relations. Additionally, there are discussions as to the possibility of organizing intelligence at a transnational level. At the beginning this was narrowed to the negotiation of transnational sharing agreements; however, the 9/11 events raised a discussion of how intelligence could support multilateral peacekeeping with the involvement of institutions such as the UN (Herman, 2001, p. 21). One other option could be suggested that the USA can be the first 'transnational security state' or a 'world policeman' as it already sees itself. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the USA has emerged as the main superpower – the only state with enough economic and military resources to give it the ability to take self-sufficient action almost in any part of the globe (Todd & Bloch, 2003, p. 94). Also, the prospect of collective international action can rest heavily upon US' readiness to provide political and/or material assistance (cases of Kosovo, Rwanda and Sudan). Even though, the global 'War on Terror' was declared and defined in Washington, other countries still have not surrendered their own intelligence systems for the safeguarding of internal security. Thus, we will now begin our third part that will examine the role played by intelligence in influencing state activities.

If 'knowledge is power' it can also be deduced that intelligence is a form of power itself. "Information can support the exercise of other forms of power – for example material or coercive. Intelligence provides the basis for policy or decisions – people, organizations and states, if they are to act 'rationally', will do so after canvassing fully the alternative courses of action open to them and their costs and benefits" (Gill & Phythian, 2006, p. 33). Therefore, tensions can arise between intelligence' conclusions and politicians' desire for particular answers. Policy is usually formulated based on principles or grounded in ideology, while intelligence is produced by evaluating 'dry' information. When they meet, the contest is uneven: 'When intelligence clashes with policy preference, intelligence loses; when information runs up against power, information is the casualty. Indeed, when information is countered by perception or, more accurately, conception, evidence is discounted' (Fry & Hochstein, 1994, p. 20). Thus, in practice intelligence information will be judged upon its ability to support a chosen course of action which has been formed even before the search for information, in this way creating a reversed knowledge/power relationship. An additional variable at the centre of security intelligence is secrecy, since: 'Without secrets it is not intelligence' (Warner, 2009, p. 9). Secrecy is important not just as barrier to surveillance – it permeates aspects of the process itself. Some actions make no sense unless carried out with an element of 'surprise', such as arrests (Herman, 2001, p. 5). However, secrecy also raises key issues of legality, morality and accountability.

Furthermore, intelligence is not only a foundation for state policies – it has always had a significant role in informing and exercising actions that are not widely appreciated and, indeed, may actually breach domestic or international law. Mostly debated is 'covert action' or 'special political action' as practised by the CIA. Intelligence agencies not only engage in rather passive activity of gathering intelligence on world affairs, but also try to intervene covertly to influence events. Some authors see covert action as essential to intelligence (Russel, 2007, p. 281), while some characterized it as an additional activity, somewhat separate from the main business of intelligence. "Intelligence is information and information gathering, not doing things to people; no-one gets hurt by it, at least not directly. Some agencies do indeed carry out covert action, which confuses the ethical issues, but this a separable and subsidiary

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function" (Herman, 2004, p. 180).

Also, intelligence methods have been applied in order to disrupt the activities of criminal organizations that are involved in drugs, arms or people trafficking. Since 9/11, due to perceived terrorist threats, even more attention has been given to this development by the convergence of security, police and military intelligence. However, could it be said that the modern transformation of intelligence by the application of highly sophisticated surveillance and information technology has overshadowed the fact that, at its core, it remains an intellectual process? Most intelligence effort since 9/11 has been put into the investigation and prevention of terrorist attacks. Many analytical techniques deploy sophisticated software facilitating the analysis of relational data. However, the cleverness of the software cannot provide a 'technological fix': analysis remains at heart an intellectual exercise based on reasoning (Russel, 2007, p. 213).

The controversial case of 2003 Iraqi WMD perfectly resembles how intelligence was used explicitly as part of an attempt by governments to justify and gain support for their policies as it was discussed in one of the previous chapters. Major international discontent and debates, particularly in the USA and UK, arose after the failure to find the WMD that was the core justification for the invasion. The lack of evidence of WMD was continually evaluated as indicating that the regime continued to conceal them, rather than as indicating that they had been destroyed despite all the information gathered by the sophisticated intelligence apparatus of the world's most powerful nations and supplemented by the work of UN weapons inspectors. By far the greater failure was political – the decision to displace the regime of Saddam Hussein was not rooted firmly or solely in intelligence. Intelligence was used to justify a policy decision that was arrived at for different reasons. Therefore, the costs of failure can be very high, whether it is in the sense that intelligence does not provide adequate forewarning of some 'surprise' attack, as on 9/11 or 7/7, warns us of a 'threat' that does not actually exist, as in the case of Iraq's WMD, or threatens the integrity of the political process (Lefebvre, 2003). Security intelligence must remain a limited means of governance, and not become an end in itself.

Having briefly covered the concept of 'intelligence' and questioned its applicability nowadays in parts one and two, as well as analysed its role towards states' policies, it is safe to say that the need for information is a common feature among individuals, groups, organizations, states and societies. Faced with uncertainty, risk, feelings of insecurity, or in search of some other goal, all human entities face a 'knowledge problem' (Gill & Phythian, 2006, p. 30) and search for information that (they hope) will support their interests, relieve the feeling of insecurity, and allow them to handle their weak spots. The ongoing issue of 'global war on terror' and apparent dilemmas related to nuclear activities of Iran and North Korea demonstrate the continued important role of intelligence in determining future relationships among states. "Intelligence has never been more important in world politics than it is now at the opening of the twenty-first century" (Scott & Jackson, 2004, p. xi).

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