

**INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

INTELLIGENCE AND THE IR CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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Abstract

There is considerable debate as to how intelligence should be defined. Should a definition include covert action or secrecy as being an important part of the activity? Is it relevant intelligence to be defined as the knowledge and foreknowledge necessary to address the external threats or different risks? The article upholds the idea that defining intelligence, implicitly or explicitly, involves adopting and assuming IR theoretical prepositions and intends to explore the implications of IR constructivist assumptions in defining intelligence. In our opinion, the task of defining intelligence is provocative because it is very difficult to reach an objective definition delineated from subjective views imbued in the author's creeds of the preferable world system. For instance, defining intelligence in terms of agency through which states seek to protect or extend their relative advantage places the author in a political culture of organizing the world in realist perspective, with predefined actors, and reveals the dependence to particular security culture.

IR constructivist approach generates alternative interpretations of world politics therefore defining intelligence through constructivist lenses would lead to new hermeneutics, allowing us to critically interpret the classical definitions of intelligence and envisage the way forward regarding the intelligence reform.

Keywords: *definition, intelligence, IR theory, constructivism, security culture.*

Introducere

There is considerable debate as to how intelligence should be defined. Should a definition include covert action or secrecy as being an important part of the activity? Is it relevant intelligence to be defined as the knowledge and foreknowledge necessary to address the external threats or different risks?

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The voices who reject the importance of the topic express their reluctance as regarding the value of theories of intelligence. For instance, Philip Davies (2009, pp. 186 - 187), mentions Huxley's aphorism that science is "organized common sense" and speaks about a "cognitive contagion" regarding the nexus theory-intelligence. Davies starts its study mentioning that "Canadians are fond of saying that when America catches a cold they get the flu" suggesting that the topic, intelligence theory, is not so important as "there are entire fields of inquiry that are effectively entirely without theory". Therefore, the author appreciates that "there is no a priori need" for theorizing intelligence as "there is no a priori need the social sciences to have theory in order to be scientific". Yet, Davies (2009, p. 187) admits after a few lines that "theory is, of course, a hugely ambiguous idea in its own right", acknowledging, in fact, that it is not simple and easy to configure the object of study.

The lack of convergence about how intelligence should be defined and in which terms that might configure the entire spectrum of intelligence activities does not prove that theorizing intelligence it's a waste of time, a literary vagabondage or that has little importance compared to practical activities. We believe that there is nothing more practical than a good theory because a good definition should be able to provide a good security strategy, for instance. Defining intelligence in classical terms like collection and analysis of information says nothing essential for the process of intelligence. Essential would be deciphering the relevant information, a process dependent on certain hermeneutics or frameworks of analysis.

Our intention is to reveal the connection and the dependence of traditional definitions of intelligence to a specific security culture, namely with the IR realist/power politics paradigm, and then to explore in which way the constructivist perspective of the international scene modifies the terms of the mainstream definitions of intelligence.

Definitions of intelligence reflect the realist/power - politics strategic culture

The bulk of definitions of intelligence revolve around key concepts specific to Cold War period and subscribed to the realist

paradigm of International Relations. Having as key terms state activity, secret, foreign entities, actual or potential adversaries, covert actions, counterintelligence and, as methodology, planning, collection, analysis, distribution, the traditional definitions are no longer useful in adapting intelligence organizations to challenges of the post – Cold War international security environment.

Even the majority of academics and practitioners of intelligence agree that the post-Cold War environment is not similar to Cold War period for many reasons, like new types of threats, new actors, transnational issues, effects of the information revolution, the Unholy Trinity – weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, organized crime (Schreier 2010, p. 48), the definitions of intelligence do not reflect the spectacular changes which characterize the current security environment when the contextual complexity means that small inputs can lead to dramatically large consequences.

The importance of defining intelligence derives from the creed that a good definition would be able to orient and organize the activities specific to intelligence organizations. For instance, defining intelligence in terms of reducing uncertainty says nothing about an organizing principle for intelligence. We thought that in order to dismantle the prevalent realist definitions of intelligence it would be a good thing to make an appeal to constructivism, an approach which has targeted the main realist assumptions.

IR Constructivist lenses in perceiving the international security environment

IR Constructivism is mainly a post-Cold War approach to international relations. Constructivism challenges the realist assumptions like the anarchic feature of the international politics, which shapes the realist strategic culture, based on the concept of power, one very much criticized for its counterproductive recommendations (reflected by the security dilemma, power politics, the armaments race, spheres of influence). Alexander Wendt (2006), a well-known constructivist theorist, was the one to attack realism by stating that “anarchy is not an objective feature of the international politics, yet anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992). Another

influential book is entitled *World of our Making*, written by Nicholas Onuf (1989), stresses the same idea, that the world is a social construct based on our thoughts and our intersubjective meanings and ideas.

We believe that if the realist assumptions are eliminated, the bulk definitions of intelligence, like those selected for illustration by Mark Phythian (2009, p. 57) become irrelevant or obsolete:

“Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities” (Warner, 2007)

“Information relevant to a government’s formulating and implementing policy to further its national security interests and to deal with threats to those interests from actual or potential adversaries.” (Shulsky & Schmitt 2002, p. 1)

“The knowledge – and ideally foreknowledge – sought by nations in response to external threats and to protect their vital interests especially the well-being of their own people.” (Johnson, 1997)

These types of definitions consolidate for instance the neorealism perception of the international scene: neorealism perceives anarchy as an objective feature of the international system and derives the security policy recommendations from that assumption. Understanding intelligence as an instrument for implementing a certain type of security policy it becomes clear that defining intelligence is dependent on a certain strategic culture.

Alexander Wendt has been criticized by other constructivist theoreticians (e.g. Zehfuss, 2006) for using the word ‘states’ in his statements as the constructivist ontology regards institutions, like states, security organizations or other social institutions as nothing more than organized culture, institutionalized meanings. States are not a given, but a social construction, an institutionalized meaning at a certain point in time. States are not a constitutive element of social reality. Constructivist ontology assumes that the scientific objects of study are the prevalent understandings, the representations, the ideas, the culture, norms, and identities shared by people. Therefore education plays an important role in shaping who we are as individuals, as members of a certain political community, as citizens of a state or as world citizens.

Constructivism can be perceived as a new ontology, a new epistemology and a new methodology in social sciences in general, and in International Relations as well. As a new ontology, constructivism assumes as objects of study the intersubjective understandings, representations, way of thinking, ideas, mentalities. As a new epistemology, constructivism generates “how possible” type questions instead of “why”, “explanatory” questions and reveals the conditions and the discursive practices that construct a security agenda (Leucea, 2012).

For instance, poststructuralist theories generate critiques aimed at exposing assumptions underpinning states of affairs that have come to be regarded as natural or inevitable, thereby demonstrating that in fact they are not, and drawing attention to the relationship between power and knowledge in the process. As explained by Michel Foucault (1988, 154, *apud*. Phythian 2009, p. 64), “a critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it. To show that things are not as self-evident as one believed”.

We think that must free ourselves from the realist overarching model of conceiving intelligence, to dismantle and blow up the realist *dictu`* and perceive recommendation like “avoiding the politicization trap” as dependent to a specific strategic and intelligence culture but not unchangeable. Realizing that intelligence “is not simply an objective eye seeing and describing reality but one which participates in the creation and reproduction of a specific international political reality” and therefore, “does not merely describe the world in which the state operates, but in fact actively creates that world” (Fry and Hochstein, 1993, p. 23, *apud*. Phythian, 2009, p. 65) would enable major transformations in designing intelligence in order to better address the future challenges. Understanding intelligence organizations as designed to find and tailor the “best truth” for decision – makers (Bertkowitz & Goodman, 2000) gives little space for improvements. The acceptance of the realist logic is based on the positivist assumptions.

Practitioners are would not be receptive to constructivist approaches of intelligence as long as they believe that the main role of intelligence should be that of telling the “truth to power” and to provide objective analysis, to tailor analysis to match the real or imagined customer preferences. From a realist, traditional perspective, the intelligence services should serve the needs of the policymakers and not to interfere by advocating specific policies. Conceiving in that fashion the role of intelligence, the role is limited, something similar to library services.

Politicizing intelligence in a constructivist perspective

The topic of politicizing intelligence is very much present on the agenda of Intelligence Studies. The recurrent question is whether policy shapes intelligence or the intelligence shapes policies?

Policies specific to Cold War period clearly shaped intelligence, starting with the definition, the role and its objectives. The power politics paradigm limited the intelligence activity, at least during the Cold War period, mainly to statistics, to “counting beans” (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 235). The puzzle of the strategic politics was not put into question. In the post – Cold War international period the puzzle or the strategic map is put into question, as well the defining purpose of the intelligence, that of informing the government – “telling best truth to power”, “producing that particular knowledge that a state must possess regarding the strategic environment, other states, and hostile non-state actors to assure itself that its cause will not suffer nor its undertakings fail because its statesmen and soldiers plan, decide, and act in ignorance” (Schreier 2010, p. 23).

We can state that the politicization of intelligence starts, in fact, with its definition. Adopting a definition like “intelligence is production of unbiased information about risks, dangers and threats to the national vision, and chances or opportunities for the advancement of national interests” (Schreier, 2010, p. 23) we enter in an uncritically accepted bias or, to express it more metaphorically, we enter unprepared into the uncharted waters of the XXI century.

Nowadays, taking into consideration the complexity of the international security environment, the quest for policy relevance of

intelligence products is challenging the Red Line between Intelligence and Policy. Robert Jervis (1986, p. 39) noticed that intelligence is easier to keep pure when it is irrelevant. To be useful, intelligence must engage policymaker's concerns. The traditional conception of maintaining the divide between intelligence and policy can hardly be sustained in a world where we have more mysteries than puzzles (Schreier 2010, p. 55) and where the security threats are terrifying.

The 21st Century Security environment leaves the intelligence communities in the position of not knowing how to prioritize its efforts. Highlighting that "analysis has to move from analysing what is collected to analysing what to collect" (Schreier, 2010, p. 151), yet that was the traditional task of decision-makers, the specialists raise the question of the dividing line, the red Line between Intelligence and Policy.

But if we redefine, for instance, strategic intelligence by stating that it is a process, a means to an end and that end is security; the question that remains unanswered is what justifies the means when they fail to provide security? Should the decision-maker be blamed for intelligence failure or should the intelligence services be blamed for failing accomplishing its task of providing security? This is a serious question and a reason why intelligence failure is a core issue in intelligence studies.

The traditional model of describing the intelligence process does not consider the political factor as being a part of the intelligence cycle. "The intelligence cycle, a model that describes the sequence of activities that carries intelligence from the initial planning stages all the way to a finished product ready for the consideration, consists of five phases: planning and direction, collection, processing, production and analysis, and dissemination. Conceptually the cycle provides at least a rough approximation of how intelligence professionals think of their work." (Johnson 2009, p. 34) The phases of the intelligence cycle do not include the first phase, the most important one, establishing the intelligence needs and priorities, the traditional task of the decision - makers, the configurators of the big puzzle in mapping security challenges.

Conclusions

In other words, as Warner (2009, p. 16), remarks, “intelligence seems to mean roughly what it meant a long time ago. We still use it to denote (among other things) a counsellor to sovereign power, a type of privileged information, and the activity of acquiring, producing, and possibly acting on that information. What we can say without hesitation is that, for most of history, intelligence has been used to oppress and to maintain systems of oppression”.

The prevalent model of conceiving intelligence uses methodological terms: collection-and-analysis, along with counterintelligence and covert action, but leaves aside the relationship between the producer of intelligence and the consumer of intelligence. Although some specialists expressed that “the concept of intelligence cycle prevents an intelligence system from thinking, that analysis and collection are not two different activities, but two names for the same search for knowledge” there are no signs of a revolutionary change in reconfiguring intelligence in accordance with the revolutionary change that took place in the world.

Constructivism raises the awareness towards the importance of ideas, identities, and international political culture and towards reframing the big picture for studying the world, implicitly the intelligence processes.

In conceiving the intelligence cycle, for instance, by placing the analysis first and then the collection phase, the move would reduce the emphasis on surveillance and would accentuate the role of the analyst elevating the role of education in configuring the frames of mind. The target – centric approach does not offer a comprehensive picture for understanding macro dynamics or the grand strategy of the enemy. Focusing on a specific target, more information collected is not the recipe for the correct interpretation. As Richard Heuer (1999, p. 51) highlights by addressing the question: do we really need more information? More information means more understanding? The difficulties associated with intelligence analysis are often attributed to the inadequacy of available information, yet investing heavily in improved intelligence collection systems, comparatively with the small

sums devoted to enhancing analytical resources, improving analytical methods, or “gaining better understanding of the cognitive processes involved in making analytical judgments” might be the key in preventing the intelligence failures. The provocative issue is, in fact, “seeing the elephant” or “seeing the invisible” and not pieces of it.

Estimating the international security environment is dependent on the analyst mind, framework of interpretation. Within the social sciences domain has been accredited the idea that most specialists lack a general perspective, a systemic perspective. It is important to recognize, stresses Buzan & Little (2009, p. 57), that the systemic perspective is created by the analyst. Amassing information would just hide the priority to conceptualize the map, the bigger picture.

Therefore, in order to uphold that for instance secrecy is a key to understanding the essence of intelligence one must clarify the big picture which advocates the definition. If we come to realize that the main task of intelligence should be education, research, creation of a new security culture, then we’ll have an inverted pyramid: more researchers and educators and less collectors. Understanding that “analysing what to collect” comes first places us within the field of Security Studies and International Relation theory. The analyst – centric approach of the intelligence cycle emphasizes the necessity of understanding the intelligence organizations as preeminent learning organizations and research centres, consultative groups of experts.

Among the aims of the Intelligence Studies we find the desiderata to search for a scientific definition of intelligence in order to find as well a good strategy to navigate in the new turbulent international context. Maybe it is necessary that intelligence to have as main role to conceive and establish that strategic culture or the conditions in which threats are eliminated or kept at a distance. The intelligence services could have as well the role to enhance the intelligence education, to promote and create an improved security culture, to build a new security paradigm, to increase the number of intelligence researchers, to extend the educational programs or to develop independent research agenda in intelligence studies.

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