

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

## THE IMPERATIVES OF RESHAPING THE NATURE OF INTELLIGENCE TO ADDRESS THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SECURITY CHALLENGES

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### **Abstract:**

*Highlighted even in the Bible within the famous episode of liberation of Israelites from Pharaoh's slavery under the leadership of prophet Moses, intelligence as an action of collecting information about enemy for the purpose of creating an advantage for own side or as a way of fortifying own security has constituted a realm of ideas from immemorial time. Many scholars illustrated different examples and gave different reasons for researching the paradigm of intelligence yet the aspect less emphasized was the importance of connecting and discussing intelligence in relation with the effectiveness of diplomatic and military undertakings correlated to specific strategic cultural and geopolitical contexts. This paper discusses the importance of reshaping intelligence in accordance with the 21<sup>st</sup> century security challenges and indicates that intelligence should suffer profound transformations for the purpose of backing the settings of nations' foreign policies according to their desired geo-strategic status. Overall, intelligence might be nowadays the silver bullet reaching the minds of soldiers, society and policymakers for a secured world.*

**Keywords:** *awareness, intelligence, security, strategy, warfare, 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

### **Introduction**

The national and international security challenges manifest new dynamics, correlated with features of the social international arena emphasising themes such as classical military crisis, but also cognitive warfare, disinformation and propaganda (Mölder et. al., 2021). This

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*status quo* generates serious impetus to reconsider the nature of intelligence, its role, functioning and all its correlated features. Yet the contemporary security challenges gives no time to procrastination but to formulate theoretical answers having great practical relevance when considering the actionable intelligence.

The classical perspective of intelligence as a complementary area of study offering an upgraded understanding of international relations, extremely fascinating for scholars, policymakers and the general public has now very important practical ends.

Its mirage derives not only from the variety of theories and conceptualizations, but also from the mysterious side of one of the most secretive and less researched areas of international relations that do not longer represents the “opium of the intellectuals” (Aron, 1955) but the main cognitive battlefield projecting the future of international society. Indeed, the theoretical answers the scholars provide, even within the field of intelligence studies, take part in the global competition for cultural lenses the people use and act upon.

The aim of this paper is to offer an overview of intelligence concept, based on historical and theoretical aspects derived both from ancient philosophers and modern scholars, for the purpose of depicting the development of the intelligence paradigm and not ultimately, to highlight through relevant examples that the classical assumptions on the role of intelligence might be outdated in connection, for instance, with the effectiveness of diplomatic and military undertakings.

### **Theoretical background**

Intelligence along with its multitude of features was an encrypted paradigm both in theory and in practice despite its ancient background. Although organised intelligence and its emergence as a sub domain of international relations are relatively new, intelligence is one of the oldest professions that transcend time since antiquity. However, as an old saying reveals, longevity does not automatically mean understanding.

“Questions like what is intelligence?”, “What does it do?”, “What should it do?”, as well as discussions over the possible answers have included professors, students, independent scholars and intelligence practitioners. “They have informed a growing number of articles,

conference panels and anthologies. These debates have indirectly influenced policy” (Warner, 2014, p. 25).

Michael Herman (2007, p. 9) has argued that intelligence – a set of permanent institutions – dates back only to the second half of the nineteenth century, but as information and new (intelligence) has always been collected as part of warfare (...) and equally important in peacetime. Related to the idea of cognitive or hybrid threats, the classification of intelligence as a set of permanent institutions might be unessential in the contemporary context within the endeavour to respond to asymmetric threats that might require the involvement of the entire society.

The same judgement may be formulated when speaking about the role of spies. The role of espionage was perceived during history as extremely relevant, the specialists insisting on the idea that espionage was used starting with unmemorable times. This aspect has been also outlined by the aforementioned author: “rulers from the earliest times tapped the knowledge of merchants and other travellers” (Herman, 2007, p. 9).

The insistence on the idea that there were many contributors to the adjustments of the intelligence paradigm who were aware of the importance of this tool for the policymakers, from its primary status to its institutionalised emergence, has persisted in the public narrative.

One of the earliest consecrated authors who wrote about intelligence in terms of gathering information about enemy for the purpose of obtaining a strategic advantage in military decisions was no other than Sun Tzu, an ancient Chinese military general who authored the famous book *The Art of War* – considered to be fundamental for the theory of military strategy. For instance, in the last chapter of his book, *On the use of spies*, Sun Tzu develops ideas that reveal his awareness on the direct causality between accurate intelligence and the efficiency of a military undertaking.

Indeed, foreknowledge – understood as knowledge or awareness of something before its occurrence –, is highly appreciated by Sun Tzu (1998, p. 168) who argues that it “cannot be gotten from ghosts and spirits, cannot be had by analogy, cannot be found out by calculation; it must be obtained from people, people who know the conditions of the enemy”.

Furthermore, Sun Tzu (1998, p. 172) emphasizes the importance of espionage in times of peace or war as “is essential for military operations, and the armies depend on this in their actions”. In this way, the typology and the profession of spy started to make career in literature.

However, in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century security challenges, the typology of the profession of spies fades away as the enemy has no longer definite and identifiable contours. As Fred Schreier (2010, p. 37) outlines, the new threats have ubiquitous profiles, amorphous design and “are increasingly transnational, non-conventional, and asymmetric in nature...are more random and non-linear in emergence, almost impossible to predict in advance, rendering foreknowledge of intentions, doctrine, and rules of engagement most difficult to obtain”. Indeed, countering the new threats requires intelligence to be more related with the original idea of intelligence: intelligence as information.

Another illustrative ancient philosopher who tackles this topic is Sun Bin, a descendant of Sun Tzu’s philosophy school. Sun Bin advances the idea of studying intelligence, moving the thematic from security dilemma to strategic advantage (*shi*) reasons. According to translators of Sun Bin, D.C. Lau and R. Ames (2003, p. 63) “when *shi* is translated as strategic advantage, many Western readers move immediately to assign it to one side of the conflict or the other. *Shi*, however, refers to all of the factors on both sides of the conflict: numbers, terrain, logistics, morale, weaponry and so on”.

In addition, D.C. Lau and R. Ames (2003, p. 63) remark that Sun Bin emphasizes “that *shi* is not a given, but it must be created and carefully cultivated”. Cultivation through education and the rewarding of people who gather information, the spies, is one of the key actions in achieving military success. This opinion is shared by Sun Tzu (1998, p. 170) who admitted that “therefore no one in the armed forces is treated as familiarly as are the spies, no one is given rewards as rich as those given to spies, and no matter is more secret than espionage.” As it can be noticed, these classical approaches outline once again that accurate intelligence plays a decisive role in the effectiveness of diplomatic and military undertakings.

Departing from the ancient times and reaching the middle Ages, we encounter the work of another philosopher that devoted important part of his research to understanding the secrets of war and subsequently, the advantages of accurate intelligence. Florentine statesman, writer and political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli analysed the spectrum of intelligence within the only theoretical work printed during his lifetime, *The Art of war*. The aforementioned author gives advice regarding the avoidance of betrayal, so numerous within the conflicts of the dark ages: “if you suspect anybody in your army of giving the enemy intelligence of your designs, you cannot do better than to avail yourself of this treachery by seeming to trust him with some secret resolution which you intend to execute, while you carefully conceal your real design; hence, you may perhaps discover the traitor and lead the enemy into an error that may possibly end in its destruction” (Machiavelli, 1965, p. 170).

Practically, Niccolo Machiavelli offers a brief idea over the cure against betrayal, being a primary definition for the use of counterintelligence as a way of assuring successful military or diplomatically undertakings. In addition, the Florentine statesman illustrates different hypostases when intelligence combined with strategy play an important role in military actions: “in order to penetrate the enemy’s secret designs and to discover the disposition of his army, some have sent ambassadors with skilful and experienced officers in their train dressed like the rest of their attendants (...) others have pretended quarrel with, and banish, a particular confidant who has gone over to the enemy and afterward informed them of his designs. The intentions of an enemy can also be sometimes discovered by the examination of the prisoners you take (...) but above all things, a general ought to endeavour to divide the enemy’s strength by making him suspicious of his counsellors and confidants” (Machiavelli, 1965, pp. 171-173).

Therefore, Niccolo Machiavelli offers not only strategic advice regarding military movements or positions, but also his work is related to previously mentioned Sun Bin’s *shi*, being focused on acquiring strategic advantage through using intelligence and counterintelligence. The interpretation of the aforementioned author reveals the importance

of counterintelligence for the information warfare: identifying the strategic narratives enemies would employ to convince the audience to act in accordance with the strategic output envisaged. The strategic advantage of intelligence when speaking about cognitive warfare gets decisive importance when correlated with strategic communication and persuasion as reaching the mind and soul of the opponents is a *sine qua non* imperative.

According to Cambridge dictionary, intelligence means “secret information about the governments of other countries, especially enemy governments, or a group of people who collect and deal with this information” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). However, definitions of intelligence are rarely offered by scholars due to the ambiguity of multiple possible conceptualizations and the complexity of the strategic environment which configures and establishes the component parts that are encompassed within this theoretical puzzle generated by the connections with the enemy’s strategic objectives.

In the spirit of this statement, James Der Derian (1992, p. 19) admits that “intelligence is the least understood and most under theorised area of international relations” and here we find the explanation: the strategic map or environment. However, one of the most frequent definitions of intelligence belongs to M. Turner (1991, p. 303): “information management: gathering raw information; analysing it; and disseminating evaluated information to decision makers, some of whom have been elected to make national security decisions”.

The modification of the accent in the definition of intelligence might be that related to decision makers as in a democratic political culture or context the intelligence dissemination has the society or the general public as beneficiary. Therefore, the interpretation offered by James Der Derian (1992, p. 21) as “intelligence is the continuation of war by the clandestine interference of one power into the affairs of another power” can be interpreted as well as cultural intelligence or cultural diplomacy.

Indeed, the relevant information to be transformed in intelligence has very strong connections with strategy. A certain strategic culture is involved when an actor assumes that, for instance, the last (but not the least) stage of the “cycle of intelligence” is constituted by the

dissemination process. Delivering the best truth to decision makers might have marginal importance when the instruments of influence in a cognitive battlefield are for instance fictional information based on soft power means used for the purpose of reaching certain strategic or political goals.

Therefore, defining intelligence requires correlation with certain strategic cultures, strategic objectives and temporal fragmentation or historical periodization. As Jennifer Sims (2014, p. 45) concluded, "intelligence cannot be reduced to a fact-checking service and still succeed at enabling competitive wins." Finally, having in mind the need to better understand the tendency highlighting the accent put on the collection stage of the intelligence cycle in correlation with the spectrum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century security challenges, the authors consider that intelligence should be re-evaluated in connection with the strategic outcomes to be accomplished using intelligence means.

### **Beneficiaries and critics**

It is a well-known fact that US president gets a daily overview on intelligence whereas British Prime Minister receives regular reports. The content of information received by political leaders is extremely important because their decisions are weighting enormously and as a consequence, intelligence obtained should be carefully filtered through all component stages before dissemination.

However, intelligence failures can occur for many reasons and at any stage of the intelligence cycle and not infrequently the consequences are extremely serious; for instance, different warnings received from intelligence agencies before the launch of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or 7/7 were not sufficient in order to thwart the plot.

Despite the commonality within scholars and public regarding the benefits of the intelligence for society in general and for political decisions in particular, there is still reluctance regarding the actionable or practical aspects of intelligence. Indeed, the intelligence paradigm has raised several questions within the public for different issues such as transparency, hidden funding, violations of human rights or famous failures. However, it should be remarked that some of these issues are



generated by mass-media whose perspectives are not all the time the most researched.

As it is known, failure attracts more attention than success not only because of the audience of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so much interested in presumably never seen subjects, but also because successes are mostly kept in quiet as a possible foreign interference can alter the *modus operandi*. Michael Herman (2007, p. 224) argued that “the circumstances of intelligence increase the risk of biased judgements about it. Its failures make for good media exposure; and official enquiries always search for culpability, in a way historians are liable to inherit (...) for example, the USA’s effective use of Western intelligence on Soviet military preparations to deter Soviet action against Poland in 1980-1 has attracted less attention than the failure to judge that the Warsaw Pact preparations around Czechoslovakia in August 1968 were for a military invasion.”

However, sometimes an outcome of an intelligence operation can be dualistic, different perspectives being perceived depending on the subjectivity of the commentator. Michael Herman (2007, p. 225) contextualizes this idea with much ability “the Cuban missile crisis was partly an intelligence failure, since US intelligence originally discounted the possibility that Soviet surface-to-surface missiles would be deployed on the island. Yet their subsequent detection in U-2 imagery was an intelligence triumph.”

### **The input of the intelligence agencies for the diplomatic and military undertakings**

Agencies are different from state to state as their orientations are shaped by different geo-political characteristics. James Rusbridger (1991, p. 37) offers a unique characterisation of the most dominant intelligence agencies: “Americans like their billion-dollar computerised organisation, believing that big is beautiful, and now these monoliths are out of control. The British stumble after Americans trying to copy their technology but waste their limited resources because their agencies are run by an amateurish elite who are too highly politicised and target the wrong enemies, allowing the real spies to go free. The Russians are so bureaucratic that any gems of intelligence they might cull are lost in a

mass of trivial dross. The French are pragmatic to the point of openness over their illegal activities but in the end, it is the smallest and most immoral of them all, Mossad, which is the most efficient.” (James Rusbridger, 1991, p. 37)

A possible counterexample for the impact of intelligence on military and diplomatically decision resides in Mossad. This secret service is extremely efficient as combines the efficiency of a small group of dedicated agents with the advantages of an ethnic and religious community of Jews all over the world who are serving the cause of Israel from minor arrangements such as shelter or food for agents to counterintelligence. James Rusbridger (1991, p. 37) remarks that “whether any intelligence does much good or actually enhances a country’s security is doubtful. After all, despite the success of Mossad, Israel still lives in a perpetual state of fear and terrorism. But the intelligence game is now an international affair where winning and point-scoring is the most important thing”. Certainly, a good intelligence cannot be the guarantor of a nation’s security, but more than sure it is involved in a high degree.

Again, the reshaping of intelligence in accordance with the strategic goals within an international dynamic context is of highest importance. Defining intelligence in an ahistorical perspective might have no relevance as a toolkit for mapping its role in a fundamentally changed environment. As Jennifer Sims (2014, p. 46) put it, intelligence should be related to international politics. Indeed, intelligence favours the settings for nations’ foreign policies according to their geo-strategic status.

Nowadays, intelligence sharpens its surveillance skills and warning methods to counter-act even newer threats such as terrorism. Intelligence is important in terms of prevention as it functions as a surveillance mechanism ready to intercept through counter-espionage any threats to the national security. Espionage is also an intelligence tool heavily used in both peacetime and wartime and it can vary from technological, economical to military purposes.

An interesting passage, very relevant in understanding the reasons of espionage, is depicted in the book *Red Horizons*, written by Lieutenant General Ion Mihai Pacepa, the highest-ranking intelligence official ever to have defected from the former Eastern Bloc. In the context

of remembering a meeting with the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu where different *intelligence thefts* from Western countries were presented to him, Ion Pacepa reveals the following dialogue: “Weapons, comrades, are the most desirable items of trade in today’s world. That does not mean we shouldn’t also smuggle plain chips out onto the Western market as American-made (Ceausescu) and a high rank intelligence officer replied “we haven’t spent any money on research” and “we haven’t paid for the license”. We don’t have to pay any royalties. And our labour costs are a fraction of those in the West. It wouldn’t surprise any of us to see some “Western firms in trouble soon” (Pacepa, 1987, pp. 46-47).

As a consequence, not only that espionage can be cost-effective in terms of expenditure, but it can also create a strong imbalance in terms of economic, military and technological equity. Indeed, intelligence theft was an intensive and common procedure of during the Cold War, and this practice is still topical nowadays.

A huge number of attempts or accomplished intelligence thefts are reported yearly through mass-media or government release. Most common intelligence thefts are conducted by geopolitical enemies or in other words, challengers, but sometimes intelligence smuggling happens within allies. James Rusbridger (1991, p. 36) chose a relevant example in order to illustrate this aspect: “Despite the fact that over the years America has been Israel’s guardian, both politically and militarily, and continues to give Israel \$3 billion-worth of aid annually, that does not stop it from falling victim to Mossad’s activities. In 1985, Jonathan Pollard, a US Navy analyst, was paid \$30,000 by Mossad in return for handing over thousands of pages of top-secret material. As part of the same operation, Mossad is credited with the theft of enough uranium from a plant in Pennsylvania to make six nuclear weapons.” (James Rusbridger, 1991, p. 36)

Talking about the imperatives of intelligence, Michael Herman (2007, p. 155) concludes that: “its effect is to optimize national strength and international influence, on varying scales (...) In both war and peace intelligence’s consistent impacts are cumulative, relatively unsurprising contributions to effectiveness and influence. Overlaying any regular patterns there is serendipity or luck.

## Conclusions

The nature of intelligence theme has a preeminent importance at the global scale. The fact that intelligence concept does not have a fully-covered theoretical background highlights the importance of correlating and embedding it within the concept of strategic environment or international political culture.

Policymakers realised the importance of accurate intelligence in their militarily and diplomatically undertakings as its effects have emerged in a variety of fields of action such as: army, technology, cybernetics or diplomacy. As a result, intelligence remains a persistent priority of governments. Therefore, the intelligence paradigm attracts the interest of scholars, policymakers, philosophers and the general public as it developed and amplified the agenda of security culture. The mirage of this paradigm comes from the mystery that surrounds this subject. More common under the auspices of covert operations, intelligence has a huge impact on the diplomatically and militarily undertakings.

As a consequence, what intelligence represents has become not only a subject to explore for mainly theoretical ends, but the very important asset in order to achieve and accomplish the task of providing security in a world deeply modified considering the parameters used in mapping the international security environment.

In the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, it is critical to understand intelligence by employing adequate hermeneutics of facts. As in the traditional positivist concept, intelligence is supposed to deliver “facts” and “not diverge into assessments and other kind of guesswork”, there is a wonder whether even “the standard model of the role of intelligence in decision-making” will still be based in the future on this image of an “idealized policy expert” bringing neutral authority to bear on policy (Marrin, 2009, p. 135).

Therefore, the legends surrounding intelligence will always be attractive as we are keen to know what “the other” thinks. The mentality of “the other is nowadays more than ever targeted, the interests and the counteracting measures continuing to be searched for”. Whereas successes of intelligence reflect in our daily lives, astonishing failures will always make big echoes in our minds.

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