

## WHAT IS “INTELLIGENCE”?

**W**hat is **intelligence**? Why is its definition an issue? Virtually every book written on the subject of intelligence begins with a discussion of what “intelligence” means, or at least how the author intends to use the term. This editorial fact reveals much about the field of intelligence. If this were a text on any other government function—defense, housing, transportation, diplomacy, agriculture—there would be little or no confusion about, or need to explain, what was being discussed.

Intelligence is different from other government functions for at least two reasons. First, much of what goes on is secret. Intelligence exists because governments seek to hide some information from other governments, which, in turn, seek to discover hidden information by means that they wish to keep secret. All of this secrecy leads some authors to believe that there are certain issues about which they cannot write or may not have sufficient knowledge. Thus, they feel the need to describe the limits of their work. Although numerous aspects of intelligence are—and deserve to be—kept secret, this is not an impediment to describing basic roles, processes, functions, and issues.

Second, this same secrecy can be a source of consternation to citizens, especially in a democratic country such as the United States. The U.S. intelligence community is a relatively recent government phenomenon. Since its creation in 1947, the intelligence community has been the subject of much ambivalence. Some Americans are uncomfortable with the concept that intelligence is a secret entity within an ostensibly open government based on checks and balances. Moreover, the intelligence community engages in activities—spying, eavesdropping, covert action—that some people regard as antithetical to what they believe the United States should be as a nation and as a model for other nations. Some citizens have difficulty reconciling American ideals and goals with the realities of intelligence.

To many people, intelligence seems little different from information, except that it is probably secret. However, distinguishing between the two is important. Information is anything that can be known, regardless of how it is discovered. Intelligence refers to information that meets the stated or understood needs of policy makers and has been collected, processed, and focused to meet those needs. Intelligence is a subset of the broader category of information. Intelligence and the entire process by which it

is identified, obtained, and analyzed responds to the needs of policy makers. All intelligence is information; not all information is intelligence.

## WHY HAVE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES?

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The major theme of this book is that intelligence exists solely to support policy makers in myriad ways. Any other activity is either wasteful or illegal. The book's focus is firmly on the relationship between intelligence, in all of its aspects, and policy making. The policy maker is not a passive recipient of intelligence but actively influences all aspects of intelligence. (This concept of the policy maker–intelligence relationship would also be true for business as well as government. The focus in this book is on governments.)

Intelligence agencies exist for at least four major reasons: to avoid strategic surprise; to provide long-term expertise; to support the policy process; and to maintain the secrecy of information, needs, and methods.

*To Avoid Strategic Surprise.* The foremost goal of any intelligence community must be to keep track of threats, forces, events, and developments that are capable of endangering the nation's existence. This goal may sound grandiose and far-fetched, but several times since the early twentieth century, nations have been subjected to direct military attacks for which they were, at best, inadequately prepared—Russia was surprised by Japan in 1904, both the Soviet Union (by Germany) and the United States (by Japan) in 1941, and Israel (by Egypt and Syria) in 1973. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States are another example of this pattern, albeit carried out on a much more limited scale.

Strategic surprise should not be confused with tactical surprise, which is of a different magnitude and, as Professor Richard Betts of Columbia University pointed out in his article, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," cannot be wholly avoided. To put the difference between the two types of surprise in perspective, suppose, for example, that Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones are business partners. Every Friday, while Mr. Smith is lunching with a client, Mr. Jones helps himself to money from the petty cash. One afternoon Mr. Smith comes back from lunch earlier than expected, catching Mr. Jones red-handed. "I'm surprised!" they exclaim simultaneously. Mr. Jones's surprise is tactical: He knew what he was doing but did not expect to get caught; Mr. Smith's surprise is strategic: He had no idea the embezzlement was happening.

Tactical surprise, when it happens, is not of sufficient magnitude and importance to threaten national existence, although it can be psychologically devastating. To some extent, the 9/11 attacks were tactical surprises. Repetitive tactical surprise, however, suggests some significant intelligence problems. (See box, "The Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001: Another Pearl Harbor?")

The advent of missiles with intercontinental ranges, armed with nuclear weapons, put an increased emphasis on intelligence to avoid surprise attack for the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, the use of cyberspace offers possibilities for devastating attacks that could be even more difficult to detect or to deter.

# THE TERRORIST ATTACKS ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: ANOTHER PEARL HARBOR?

Many people immediately described the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon as a “new Pearl Harbor.” This is understandable on an emotional level, as both were surprise attacks. However, important differences exist.

First, Pearl Harbor was a strategic surprise. U.S. policy makers expected a move by Japan but not against the United States. The Soviet Union was seen as a possible target, but the greatest expectation and fear was a Japanese attack on European colonies in Southeast Asia that bypassed U.S. possessions, thus allowing Japan to continue to expand its empire without bringing the United States into the war.

The terrorist attacks were more of a tactical surprise. The enmity of Osama bin Laden and his willingness to attack U.S. targets had been amply demonstrated in earlier attacks on the East African embassies and on the USS *Cole*. Throughout the summer of 2001, U.S. intelligence officials had warned of the likelihood of another bin Laden attack. What was not known—or guessed—were the target and the means of attack.

Second, Japan and the Axis powers had the capability to defeat and destroy U.S. power and the U.S. way of life. The terrorists did not pose a threat on the same level.

*To Provide Long-Term Expertise.* Compared with the permanent bureaucracy, all senior policy makers are transients. The average time in office for a president of the United States is five years. Secretaries of state and defense serve for less time than that, and their senior subordinates—deputy, under, and assistant secretaries—often hold their positions for even shorter periods. Although these individuals often enter their respective offices with an extensive background in their fields, it is virtually impossible for them to be well versed in all of the matters with which they will be dealing. Inevitably, they will have to call upon others whose knowledge and expertise on certain issues are greater. Much knowledge and expertise on national security issues reside in the intelligence community, where the analytical cadre is more stable than the political office holders. (This changed somewhat in the United States after 2001. See chap. 6.) Stability tends to be greater in intelligence agencies, particularly in higher-level positions, than in foreign affairs and defense agencies. Also, intelligence agencies tend to have far fewer political appointees than do the State and Defense Departments. However, these two personnel differences (stability and non-political) have diminished somewhat over the past decade. As will be discussed later, the senior position in U.S. intelligence, the director of national intelligence (DNI),

had been extremely volatile, with four DNIs in the first five years (2005–2010). Lt. Gen. James Clapper (USAF, ret.), who was DNI from 2010 to 2017, offered greater continuity by remaining in the position longer than all of his predecessors combined. In the Donald Trump administration (2017–2021), there were two DNIs and two acting DNIs within four years, another period of instability.

*To Support the Policy Process.* Policy makers have a constant need for tailored (meaning written for their specific needs), timely intelligence that will provide background, context, information, warning, and an assessment of risks, benefits, and likely outcomes. Policy makers also occasionally need alternative means to achieve specific policy ends. Both of these needs are met by the intelligence community.

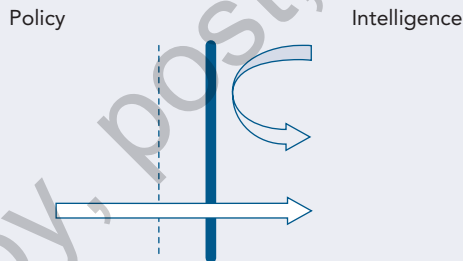
In the ethos of U.S. intelligence, a strict dividing line exists between intelligence and policy. The two are seen as separate functions. The government is run by the policy makers. Intelligence has a support role and may not cross over into the advocacy of policy choices. Intelligence officers who are dealing with policy makers are expected to maintain professional objectivity and not push specific policies, choices, or outcomes. To do so is seen as threatening the objectivity of the analyses they present. If intelligence officers have a strong preference for a specific policy outcome, their intelligence analysis may display a similar bias. This is what is meant by **politicized intelligence**, one of the strongest expressions of opprobrium that can be leveled in the U.S. intelligence community. This is not to suggest that intelligence officers do not have preferences about policy choices. They do. However, they are trained not to allow these preferences to influence their intelligence analysis or advice. If intelligence officers were allowed to make policy recommendations, they would then have a strong urge to present intelligence that supported the policy they had first recommended. At that point, all objectivity would be lost.

Three important caveats should be added to the distinction between policy and intelligence. First, the idea that intelligence is distinct from policy does not mean that intelligence officers do not care about the outcome and do not influence it. One must differentiate between attempting to influence (that is, inform) the process by providing intelligence, which is acceptable, and trying to manipulate intelligence so that policy makers make a certain choice, which is not acceptable. Second, senior policy makers can and do ask senior intelligence officials for their opinions, which are given. Third, this separation works in only one direction, that of intelligence advice to policy. Nothing prevents policy makers from rejecting intelligence out of hand or offering their own analytic inputs. When doing so, however, policy makers cannot present their alternative views as intelligence per se, in part because they lack the necessary objectivity. There are no hard-and-fast rules here, but there is an unwritten and generally agreed standard. This became an issue in 2002, when Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith created an office that, to many observers, appeared to offer alternative intelligence analyses even though it was in a policy branch. Assuming that policy makers stay within their bounds, they will likely see their offering of alternative views as being different from imposing their views on the intelligence product per se. This would also politicize intelligence, which is an accusation policy makers as well as intelligence officials hope to avoid because it calls into question the soundness of their policy and the basis on which they have made decisions. The propriety of a

policy maker rejecting intelligence was central to the 2005 debate over the nomination of John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Critics charged that Bolton, as under secretary of state, had engaged in this type of action when intelligence did not provide the answers he preferred. (See box, “Policy Versus Intelligence: The Great Divide.”) In January 2021, Barry Zulauf, the analytic ombudsman in the Office of the DNI (ODNI), said that intelligence reporting in 2019 about the threat of foreign interference in the upcoming 2020 election had been politicized to downplay the threat posed by Russia, a charge that the then-acting DNI, Richard Grenell, denied.

## POLICY VERSUS INTELLIGENCE: THE GREAT DIVIDE

One way to envision the distinction between policy and intelligence is to see them as two spheres of government activity that are separated by a semipermeable membrane. The membrane is semipermeable because policy makers can and do cross over into the intelligence sphere, but intelligence officials cannot cross over into the policy sphere.



*To Maintain the Secrecy of Information, Needs, and Methods.* Secrecy does make intelligence unique. That others would keep important information from you, that you need certain types of information and wish to keep your needs secret, and that you have the means to obtain information that you also wish to keep secret are major reasons for having intelligence agencies.

### WHAT IS INTELLIGENCE ABOUT?

The word “intelligence” largely refers to issues related to national security—that is, defense and foreign policy and certain aspects of homeland and internal security, which has been increasingly important since the terrorist attacks of 2001 and the insurrection of January 6, 2021. In U.S. law (the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act, 2004) all intelligence is now defined as **national intelligence**, which has three subsets:

foreign, domestic, and homeland security. This specification was written to overcome the past strict divide between foreign and domestic intelligence, which had come to be seen as an impediment to intelligence sharing, especially on issues like terrorism, which overlaps both areas. It is important to note that practitioners have had some difficulty distinguishing among homeland, internal, and domestic security.

The actions, policies, and capabilities of other nations and of important non-state groups (international organizations, terrorist organizations, and so on) are primary areas of concern. But policy makers and intelligence officers cannot restrict themselves to thinking only about enemies—those powers that are known to be hostile or whose policy goals are in some way inimical. They must also keep track of powers that are neutrals, friends, or even allies who are rivals in certain contexts. For example, the European Union is made up largely of nations that are U.S. allies. However, the United States competes with many of them for global resources and markets, so in that sense they are rivals. This type of relationship with the United States is also true of Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, circumstances may arise in which a country would need to keep track of the actions and intentions of friends. For example, an ally might be pursuing a course that could involve it in conflict with a third party. Should this not be to a country's liking—or should it threaten to involve that country as well—it would be better to know early on what this ally was doing. Adolf Hitler, for example, might have been better served had he known in advance of Japan's plans to attack the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941. He had no interest in seeing the United States become an active combatant and might have argued against a direct attack by Japan (as opposed to a Japanese attack to the south against European colonies but avoiding U.S. territories). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries it has become increasingly important for the United States to keep track of non-state actors—terrorists, narcotics traffickers, freelance proliferators, cyber hackers, and others.

Information is needed about these actors, their intentions, their likely actions, and their capabilities in a variety of areas, including economic, military, and societal. The United States built its intelligence organizations in recognition of the fact that some of the information it would like to have is either inaccessible or being actively denied. In other words, the information is secret as far as the United States is concerned, and those who have the information would like to keep it that way.

The pursuit of secret information is the mainstay of intelligence activity. At the same time, reflecting the political transformation brought about by the end of the cold war, increasing amounts of once-secret information are now accessible, especially in states that were satellites of or allied with the Soviet Union. The ratio of open to secret information has shifted dramatically. One former senior intelligence official estimated that, during the cold war, 80 percent of the intelligence the U.S. needed was secret and 20 percent was open, but in the post-cold war world, those ratios had reversed. These are broad rather than precise numbers, but they reflect the shift between the two types of intelligence. Still, foreign states and actors harbor secrets that the United States must pursue. And not all of this intelligence is in states that are hostile to the United States in the sense that they are enemies.

Most people tend to think of intelligence in terms of military information—troop movements, weapons capabilities, and plans for surprise attack. This is an important component of intelligence (in line with avoiding surprise attack, the first reason for

having intelligence agencies), but it is not the only one. Many different kinds of intelligence (political, economic, social, environmental, health, and cultural) provide important inputs to analysts. Policy makers and intelligence officials must think beyond foreign intelligence. They must consider intelligence activities focused on threats to internal security, such as subversion, espionage, insurrection, and terrorism.

Other than the internal security threats, domestic intelligence—at least in the United States and kindred democracies—had been treated as a law enforcement issue, although this has become an issue of contention in the United States when it comes to terrorism and the treatment of potential terrorists. It has also become an issue in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, insurrection, which is being treated as a law enforcement and a domestic and foreign intelligence issue.

However, this nexus between domestic intelligence and law enforcement differentiates the practice of intelligence in Western democracies from that in totalitarian or authoritarian states. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' State Security Committee (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*, or KGB), for example, served a crucial internal secret police function that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) does not. The same dual function is true of the Ministry of State Security in China. Thus, in many respects, these agencies were not comparable to the CIA.

What is intelligence *not* about? Intelligence is not about truth. If something were known to be true—or false—states would not need intelligence agencies to collect the information or analyze it. Truth is such an absolute term that it sets a standard that intelligence rarely would be able to achieve. It is better—and more accurate—to think of intelligence as proximate reality. Intelligence agencies face issues or questions and do their best to arrive at a firm understanding of what is going on. They can rarely be assured that even their best and most considered analysis is true. Their goals are intelligence products that are reliable, unbiased, and honest (that is, free from politicization). These are all laudable goals, yet they are still different from truth. (*See box, "And ye shall know the truth . . ."*)

## “AND YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH . . .”

Upon entering the old entrance of the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters, one will find the following inscription on the left-hand marble wall:

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

John VIII–XXXII

It is a nice sentiment, but it overstates and misrepresents what is going on in that building or any other intelligence agency.



It is also important to understand that the target of intelligence is secrets and not mysteries. Secrets refers to intelligence that someone, somewhere knows—just not us. The goal is to gain access to that intelligence. Mysteries refers to things that cannot be explained and for which no reliable intelligence likely exists—such as who built Stonehenge.

Is intelligence integral to the policy process? The question may seem rhetorical in a book about intelligence, but it is important to consider. At one level, the answer is yes. Intelligence should and can provide warning about imminent strategic threats, although, as noted, several nations have been subjected to strategic surprise. Intelligence officials can also play a useful role as seasoned and experienced advisers. The information their agencies gather is also of value given that it might not be available if agencies did not undertake secret collection. Therein lies an irony: Intelligence agencies strive to be more than just collectors of secret information. They emphasize the value that their analysis adds to the secret information, although equally competent analysts can be found in policy agencies. The difference is in the nature of the work and the outcomes for which the two types of analysts are responsible—intelligence versus policy decisions.

At the same time, intelligence suffers from a number of potential weaknesses that tend to undercut its function in the eyes of policy makers. Not all of these weaknesses are present at all times, and sometimes none is present. They still represent potential pitfalls.

First, a certain amount of intelligence analysis may be no more sophisticated than current conventional wisdom on a given issue. Conventional wisdom is usually—and sometimes mistakenly—dismissed out of hand. But policy makers expect more than that, in part justifiably.

Second, analysis can become so dependent on data that it misses important intangibles. For example, a competent analysis of the likelihood that thirteen small and somewhat disunited colonies would be able to break away from British rule in the 1770s would have likely concluded that defeat was inevitable. After all, Britain was the largest industrial power; it could manufacture weapons—which the colonies could not; it already had trained troops stationed in the colonies; colonial opinion was not united (nor was Britain's); and Britain could use the Native Americans as an added force, among other reasons. A straightforward political-military analysis would have missed several factors—the depth of British divisiveness, the possibility of help from royalist France—that turned out to be of tremendous importance.

Third, **mirror imaging**, or assuming that other states or individuals will act just the way a particular country or person does, can undermine analysis. The basis of this problem is fairly understandable. Every day people make innumerable judgments—when driving, walking on a crowded street, or interacting with others at home and at the office—about how other people will react and behave. They assume that their behavior and reactions are based on the golden rule. These judgments stem from societal norms and rules, etiquette, and experience. Analysts too easily extend this commonplace thinking to intelligence issues. However, in intelligence it becomes a trap. For example, no U.S. policy maker in 1941 could conceive of Japan's starting a war with the United States overtly (instead of continuing its advance while bypassing



U.S. territories), given the great disparity in the strength of the two nations. In Tokyo, however, that same disparate strength argued compellingly for the necessity of starting war sooner rather than later. The other problem with mirror imaging is that it assumes a certain level of shared rationality. It leaves no room for the irrational actor, an individual or nation whose rationality is based on something different or unfamiliar—for example, suicidal terrorists viewed through the eyes of Western culture.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, policy makers are free to reject or to ignore the intelligence they are offered. They may suffer penalties down the road if their policy has bad outcomes, but policy makers cannot be forced to take heed of intelligence. Thus, they can dispense with intelligence at will, and intelligence officers cannot press their way (or their products) back into the process in such cases.

This host of weaknesses may seem to overpower the positive aspects of intelligence. It certainly suggests and underscores the fragility of intelligence within the policy process. How, then, can it be determined whether intelligence matters? The best way, at least retrospectively, is to ask: Would policy makers have made different choices with or without a given piece of intelligence? If the answer is yes, or even maybe, then the intelligence mattered. The answer to this question can still be elusive because much intelligence may not be related to a specific event or decision. Richard Kerr, a former deputy director of central intelligence, reviewed fifty years of CIA analysis across a range of issues and concluded that, despite highs and lows of performance, intelligence helped reduce policy makers' uncertainty and provided them with understanding and with warning on a fairly consistent basis. This reduction of uncertainty should be seen as a valuable service even if one admits that intelligence will not always be correct. (See box, "Intelligence: A Working Concept.")

## INTELLIGENCE: A WORKING CONCEPT

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Intelligence is the process by which specific types of information important to national security are requested, collected, analyzed, and provided to policy makers; the products of that process; the safeguarding of these processes and this information by counterintelligence activities; and the carrying out of operations as requested by lawful authorities.

We return to the question: What is intelligence? Alan Breakspear, a veteran Canadian intelligence officer, defines intelligence as a capability to forecast changes—either positive or negative—in time to do something about them. We often tend to think about intelligence-related events in the negative. Breakspear's addition of "positive" is important and is akin to "opportunity analysis." (See chap. 6.)

In this book, we will think about intelligence in several ways, sometimes simultaneously:

- Intelligence as process: Intelligence can be thought of as the means by which certain types of information are required and requested, collected, analyzed, and disseminated, and as the way in which certain types of covert action are conceived and conducted.
- Intelligence as product: Intelligence can be thought of as the product of these processes—that is, as the analyses and intelligence operations themselves.
- Intelligence as organization: Intelligence can be thought of as the units that carry out its various functions.

## KEY TERMS

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intelligence 1  
mirror imaging 8

national intelligence 5  
politicized intelligence 4

## FURTHER READINGS

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Each of these readings grapples with the definition of intelligence, either by function or by role, in a different way. Some deal with intelligence on its own terms; others attempt to relate it to the larger policy process.

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