

NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE STUDIES

Q & A

Tassos Symeonides

(Academic Adviser, RIEAS)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)

Publication date: 18 June 2017

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

Intelligence Studies academic programs are proliferating. Is this a “Renaissance” of Strategic Studies in modified, more “current” incarnation?

Intelligence Studies, as a distinct academic field, is a recent development going back to the first tentative steps of the 1950s as the Cold War took hold of superpower strategies. In contrast, Strategic Studies, is ancient by comparison, its first proponents as an organized academic endeavor appearing as early as the 18th century.

While intelligence studies attempt to address various key sub-areas of academic research under a unifying principle (i.e. a ‘theory’ of intelligence studies yet undefined) strategic studies have always focused on “the relationship between politics and the many kinds of military power” and, essentially, on the principles of the conduct of war.

The two fields, however, are today symbiotic in a bidirectional manner, especially since intelligence studies aim at expanding and diversifying the methods we use to enhance national security. Both work toward collecting and analyzing reliable “real world” information to help policy makers address issues of national security. Strategic and intelligence studies will continue following parallel paths as they both break new ground in their respective research and their efforts to inform the national leadership in a reliable and timely manner.

Much is being said about the absence of a “unifying” intelligence studies theory and efforts to develop one. What exactly feeds this debate? Can we live without a “theory” or would its absence impose chronic limitations upon the growth of intelligence studies research?

Ever since the publication of Sherman Kent’s *Strategic Intelligence for American Foreign Policy* in 1966 scholars and academicians have been straining to systematize intelligence studies on the basis of “ambitious theories,” as Walter Laqueur put it in his 1985 *World of Secrets: The Uses and Limits of Intelligence*. To the disappointment of many, Laqueur’s conclusion was that all efforts at reaching such ambitious theories were failures. Searching for the Holy Grail of an intelligence studies “unifying” theory continues apace.

In the meantime, the field has been growing by leaps and bounds despite the gap of missing theory. Scholars continue to disagree on whether intelligence studies comprise a sub-field of, say, International Relations, or whether they have already cut their own research and applied independent path. Either way, the field is blossoming alongside the burgeoning activity in related areas such as International Security and Terrorism Studies.

Intelligence studies include strong analytical and operational components which could (and do) develop *outside* the strictures of scholarly hypothesizing such as that which produced the various theories of International Relations (realist, liberal, functionalist etc.) It should be also noted that, aside from the missing unifying theory, a universal *definition* of what exactly the term “intelligence” means in the political-national security field is still missing as well, although there have been many honest efforts to outline one (as, for example, [here](#)).

What intelligence studies curricula should be focusing on?

Sherman Kent said that “Intelligence means knowledge.” Kent, a distinguished historian, who has been [hailed](#) as the founder of intelligence analysis, worshipped, not unexpectedly, the historical method. His insistence on the term “knowledge” sprung from his conviction that the **purpose of intelligence is to prevent “statesmen and soldiers [to] plan and act in ignorance.”** Today, after Vietnam and the post-9/11 military interventions, we can modify the previous statement to further read “... and to plan and act on insufficient information or, worse, on concocted ‘proof’ of impending enemy action as means of imposing a political/ideological agenda on dangerously unstable environments.”

Any intelligence studies curriculum should thus concentrate on providing the learning tools to develop and disseminate Kent’s “knowledge” to those who need it. This “knowledge” filters through to policy makers via agencies created by governments to provide a “global” *rational* and *practical* understanding of strategic and political conditions affecting national security.

Historically, intelligence agencies, originally identified as “intelligence structures,” emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Industrialization, novel communication technologies, breakthroughs in transportation, military advances, and the increasing complexity of state bureaucracies forced governments to broaden the purpose and technical means of their secret espionage bureaus. It was the Second World War, and disasters like Pearl Harbor and Barbarossa, which produced the great push for the expansion of intelligence services and the strengthening of predictive capabilities based on assessment. The codebreakers of the legendary [Bletchley Park](#) of ULTRA fame were the true forerunners of today’s vast intelligence organizations

As Heraclitus said, “Men that love wisdom must be acquainted with very many things indeed.” This admonition carries a particularly taunting burden today as the world becomes ever more connected and awash in information (most of which qualifies as junk) and also warns us indirectly about the perils of biting off more than we can chew.

With the variety and breadth of intelligence studies programs growing by the day, there is often the tendency to meet the need for “knowledge” by stuffing curricula with ever expanding sub-fields and “specialties.” Curricula planners, however, should remain strictly eclectic in their choices of program elements. Going all out, in the effort to prove a program “pioneering,” could turn into a self-defeating exercise that weakens its credibility and produces “specialists” *who are average on everything and truly capable on next to nothing*. In other words, think “quality over quantity [and] quality before quantity.”

How do we develop intelligence studies into one of the pillars of successful national security thinking and policies?

Studying intelligence is not much different in methodology from pursuing any other social science project. We ask basically historical questions about “who, when, how, and why” and try to integrate the answers into a multilayered “model” aiming to provide directions on how to deal with national security threats, crises, and the use of force.

Today's realities -- political, social, international, economic -- impose limitations upon governments never seen before in democratic societies. One such limitation is the allergy experienced by Western public opinion when questions of secrecy and domestic surveillance arise. Another key concern is making intelligence oversight and accountability a non-negotiable condition of the founding charter of any intelligence agency. Unethical practices, "black ops," actions hovering just outside constitutional and legal boundaries can cause political crises which may not be "contained." Curricula should put special emphasis on how to develop policy "mindsets" which could prevent, to the extent possible, outlandish and dangerous government-sponsored programs like [this](#), which damage national security and prove conspiracy theorists correct.

We should not forget that national security intelligence practices are closely associated with national military culture, which must be understood and intensively researched. There are national intelligence "styles" to reckon with. The British style, for example, could be described as "composed" and "deliberate" thanks to a long history of colonial military engagement, protracted campaigns, and the endless pursuits of empire. The French share similar style antecedents with the British. The present American style is perceived as "technological," with an emphasis on "tooling" which has made American military power in the 21st century the most potent in the world. The latter fact, however, could be a trap for scholarly planning as it may promote a quick-fix philosophy which derives from the knowledge of material plenty leading to a false sense of possessing "hyper-capabilities" bereft of the requisite intellectual understructure. The Germans, thanks to their Nazi past, have become formalist "functionalists" to "protect the constitution" with limited capabilities to process threats. Their "style" is also influenced by legalities that often work in favor of those we would have described in the past as "enemies of the state."

It is important to sensitize program students to intelligence failure. A combination of studying history and the significance of what the Soviets first identified in the 1920s and 30s as "operational art," as applied to intelligence operations, should be a main topic of research and analysis in understanding the causes and effects of intelligence failure.

Social studies often implement "interdisciplinary" methods in their search for answers. How important is this method for intelligence studies?

It is extremely important. As it was alluded above, intelligence studies use social science methods as main research and learning tools. Recent advances in the field emphasize both historical research *and* applied decision-making methods, especially when it comes to government policy formulations.

Intelligence studies presently wrestle with the quick rise of non-state actors capable of influencing/threatening international stability. Daesh/ISIL/IS is the most glaring current specimen of how "traditional" intelligence strategies and methods can be put to a severe test by forces of obscure and alien origin -- which, at closer examination, is neither obscure nor alien to those who pay proper attention. Cross-discipline research and assessment is vital and must be addressed as a core requirement of all intelligence studies programs.

Finally, how do we describe the value of intelligence studies as a "discipline" -- although, in practice, it remains multi-disciplinary -- and its impact on national security?

The first word that comes to mind is "vital."

Intelligence studies fill the vital need for trained, capable individuals ready to take up the challenge of observing, understanding, dissecting, and explaining an increasingly chaotic and

dangerous international environment to those who need to make life-and-death decisions on behalf of all of us.

“Developmental” problems will inevitably persist. But they can be resolved via honest appraisal of ongoing national and international circumstances, the quality of the student body, and a constant reevaluation of research foci on the nature of emerging threats.

Building an “intelligence culture,” custom-made, so to speak, for the particular historical and political characteristics of a given state, is the ultimate goal. It is also important that governments, academic institutions, dedicated international bodies, and individual scholars continue to build collaborative ventures.

The one problem that should be the current Priority Number One of all intelligence studies efforts is to tackle the frequent disconnection between intelligence experts and those responsible for government action. Intelligence studies should work *against* encouraging such trends and should adopt approaches to assist in the better understanding of why gathering and analyzing “knowledge” is the cornerstone of national security decision-making. This process will be both of practical policy help but also a significant political contribution to bringing re-assurance to the “hearts and minds” of Western majorities already convinced the Orwellian Big Brother does exist.