



## GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

### Diplomacy & Intelligence

#### Strange Bedfellows

by G. Philip Hughes and Peter C. Oleson

*"Women: can't live with 'em;  
can't live without 'em!"*

— Kent Dorfman, *Animal House* (1978)

**S**pies and diplomats; diplomats and spies. Funnily enough, each could use precisely Dorfman's adage about the other.

Diplomacy – particularly effective diplomacy – depends on intelligence – particularly effective intelligence. For the purposes of this article, we use “diplomacy” to mean strategically purposeful official communication between and among governments intended to persuade other governments to cooperate with one’s own position or course of action, or to motivate collaboration on a collective solution to an international problem. By intelligence, we mean the collection by official governmental means of information on foreign parties and events/developments that is not otherwise publicly available, along with forecasts and analyses, which may combine this information with other openly collected or public-source information, to support policymakers’ decision-making and/or military acquisition, deployment, or employment decisions.

But there’s an interesting asymmetry here. Obviously, ineffective diplomacy – aimless, vacillating, irresolute, perhaps lacking strategic vision or clear

goals, or a realistic grasp of the available leverage and resources – doesn’t particularly need intelligence. In life, it’s said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” But in diplomacy, the problem is even more acute: if you don’t know where you’re going, even the most detailed and accurate “map,” provided courtesy of your intelligence apparatus – even one that identifies every peril that lies down each available road – won’t save you. In this sense, even the most effective intelligence can’t redeem ineffective diplomacy. And, in diplomacy, taking just “any road” won’t necessarily get you to your undetermined goals; more likely, it will just get you into deeper trouble.

By contrast, ineffective intelligence or assessments – too late, too vague, false, mistaken, or misleading – can destroy even the most craftily devised and executed diplomatic strategy. The most infamous recent example – Secretary of State Colin Powell’s February 2003 briefing on the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to the UN Security Council – worked in the short-term, helping rally a “coalition of the willing” to join the US-led invasion of Iraq and equipping the Bush Administration with arguments that helped secure a substantial, bi-partisan Congressional authorization for the use of force. But, in the long run, failure to find the evidence of the WMD program that Secretary Powell described in such detail – and that Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet assured President Bush before the invasion decision would be a “slam dunk” to uncover – undermined confidence in the entire enterprise of the Iraq War, at home and abroad.

#### Diplomacy’s Dependence on Intelligence

Diplomats are often reluctant to admit how much their “art” depends on the “craft” of intelligence. To anticipate looming international crises; to accurately assess adversaries’ capabilities and intentions – and allies’ strengths and degrees of steadfastness; to estimate the “limits of the possible” in enlisting/aligning with allies and supporters, or in confronting international adversaries or miscreants; to understand and exploit sources of leverage provided by possibly peripheral or even unrelated issues, with allies or adversaries; to discover — if possible, in advance — diplomatic counterparts’ negotiating positions and “bottom-lines”; even to verify adversaries’ or allies’ compliance with international obligations – all of these either require or are, at a minimum, facilitated by effective intelligence.

Here are three concrete 20th century illustrations – among the hundreds possible – of how intelligence helps diplomats. One is old; the others are of more recent vintage.

In 1921, the US intercepted and decrypted Japanese diplomatic communications during the Washington Naval Conference, providing foreknowledge of the Japanese negotiating positions, which allowed US diplomats to obtain an advantageous outcome.

More recently, the use of geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) during the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords provided detailed ground truth of the situation in that conflict area, which allowed the antagonists to negotiate having a common view of the terrain and who occupied what.<sup>1</sup>

During the Cold War, the Reagan Administration regularly dispatched Defense Intelligence Agency Deputy Director for Intelligence John Hughes to allied capitals in Europe and Asia, sharing a detailed and comprehensive briefing on Soviet military capabilities and new weapons developments. These briefings made a major contribution to holding the NATO allies together in the face of enormous Soviet diplomatic and propaganda pressure through the Soviet boycott of the START nuclear arms reduction talks in Geneva. They bolstered the NATO allies in carrying through the decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Europe to offset the Soviet SS-20 missile threat – leading ultimately to the negotiated elimination of INF weapons from Europe entirely.

Perhaps the most significant diplomatic achievements – bilateral and multilateral arms control and nonproliferation agreements – depend critically on intelligence. Verification of early Cold-War-era arms control agreements – the Atmospheric and Threshold Test-Ban Treaties, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the SALT I and START I nuclear weapons agreements – depended on “national technical means” – chiefly satellite reconnaissance.<sup>2</sup> Of course, other intelligence collection – human source collection (HUMINT), defectors, etc. – supplemented what could be discovered remotely about Soviet capabilities, new weapons developments and tests, and compliance or

noncompliance. And at the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became possible to agree to measures for continuous and periodic intrusive, on-site inspections – including on-the-ground monitoring of the output of missile production facilities – to provide robust and continuous verification.

Negotiated multilateral arms control/nuclear nonproliferation agreements similarly depend for their verification on the “national technical” intelligence capabilities of especially the United States and other Western nations, along with whatever insights can be gleaned from HUMINT, to bolster International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on-site inspections. Compliance with multi-lateral nonproliferation agreements, like the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Chemical Weapons Treaty, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the Australia Group (which restricts international trade in chemical weapons-relevant technologies), relies on information and intelligence sharing and liaison among the participating countries, since these agreements lack a central agency responsible for surveilling compliance. And, rather obviously, the members with the most extensive and robust array of intelligence capabilities – like the United States – make the most critical contributions to compliance and enforcement efforts for such agreements.

Without the contribution of intelligence to verification, both bilateral and multi-lateral arms control agreements – arguably the capstone achievements of the diplomat’s “art” in pursuit of peace – would be worse than meaningless. They would be dangerous, delusional traps, behind which nations bent on aggression would mask their military preparations.

Intelligence – particularly new or sudden discoveries or forecasts – often sets the diplomatic agenda. Presidents will direct diplomatic action when reading about specific threats or situations in their daily intelligence reports.<sup>3</sup> A threatened terrorist attack may lead to immediate cooperative international action against the terror group and its state sponsor, if it has one. Planned military actions always involve supportive diplomatic activity to gain acceptance or allay suspicions of what the US intends. Imagery intelligence of mass graves in Bosnia resulted in diplomatic pressure for the International Criminal Court to indict Serbian officials. Global warming data, gathered by both scientific earth observation satellites and intelligence sensors, has prompted diplomatic efforts to negotiate limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

1. See Gary Weir, “The Evolution of Geospatial Intelligence and The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency,” in the *Guide to the Study of Intelligence*, Association of Former Intelligence Officers, [http://www.afio.com/publications/WEIR%20Gary%20Evolution%20of%20GEOINT%20and%20NGA%20Pages%20from%20INTEL\\_FALLWINTER2015\\_Vol21\\_No3\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.afio.com/publications/WEIR%20Gary%20Evolution%20of%20GEOINT%20and%20NGA%20Pages%20from%20INTEL_FALLWINTER2015_Vol21_No3_FINAL.pdf).

2. See Robert A. McDonald, “I Can See It From Afar: I Can Hear it From Afar,” *Guide to the Study of Intelligence* at [http://www.afio.com/publications/McDONALD%20Robert%20I%20Can%20See%20It%20From%20Afar%20-%20Intel%20from%20Space%20Pages%20from%20INTEL\\_FALLWINTER2015\\_Vol21\\_No3\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.afio.com/publications/McDONALD%20Robert%20I%20Can%20See%20It%20From%20Afar%20-%20Intel%20from%20Space%20Pages%20from%20INTEL_FALLWINTER2015_Vol21_No3_FINAL.pdf).

3. The President’s Daily Brief (PDB) is shared with other senior national security policy officers, including the Secretaries of State and Defense.

Intelligence discoveries also help set the national strategy. For example, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, intelligence was important in allowing the President to choose diplomacy over immediate military action when he learned the readiness status of the missiles introduced to Cuba. A quarantine, coupled with intensive diplomatic action and public diplomacy, led to a successful – and peaceful – resolution of the crisis.

Furthermore, intelligence can serve as a check and balance for diplomats in their exchanges with others. Is a foreign representative lying? Or is he being only partially truthful? A well-placed human source can provide confirming or other intelligence.

### Diplomacy's Contribution to Intelligence

Dependent as diplomacy is on effective intelligence, it is also a major contributor to the intelligence process and products. While military attachés in embassies abroad are ostensibly present to facilitate smoothly functioning military-to-military relations, they are also overt military intelligence collectors. In larger nations with sizeable militaries and in most NATO capitals, there would typically be an attaché representing each military service, with one – typically corresponding to that nation's "senior" military service – designated as the supervising defense attaché. These officers and their staffs are a primary source of intelligence on the host nation's military order of battle, the combat readiness of its units, the results of its military exercises, biographic intelligence on the host nation's military and national defense figures, etc. Military liaison personnel – typically implementing security assistance programs – although not generally considered intelligence collectors, certainly can be sources of insight into the readiness, logistical sustainment potential, and state of training and technological proficiency of host government armed forces.

Similarly, diplomatic reporting – although not in itself considered "intelligence," because host government counterparts are aware of the diplomatic interchanges and the information they yield – provide valuable background for intelligence analysts on the host country's leadership, politics, and political power struggles; on host government intentions and orientations; on trends and currents in the host country's society and culture; on its economic performance; and a range of other topics. Diplomatic reporting is also an invaluable source of biographic intelligence on leading personalities of the host country.

In addition to their reporting contributions, diplomatic establishments abroad also play host to important assets of the Intelligence Community (IC). While technically incompatible with their diplomatic status, it is an open secret that many nations use their diplomatic posts for intelligence purposes – placing intelligence operatives in "diplomatic cover" assignments and sometimes collecting communications intelligence. When the US stations such personnel under diplomatic cover abroad in allied or friendly capitals, these officers are declared to their counterpart agencies of the host government. Often they are the conduits of "liaison relationships" with the host country's intelligence services. These can involve varying degrees of intelligence cooperation – limited technical assistance; intelligence sharing of varying degrees – ranging from limited and specialized to extensive and wide ranging; the joint operation of collection facilities in the host government's territory; or mounting joint, cooperative intelligence operations.

As criminal enterprises – e.g., narcotics trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking – have become major international problems, previously well-established lines between intelligence collected to support traditional national security functions and what was once considered law enforcement information to combat international criminality have blurred. Counterterrorism imperatives have contributed significantly to this blurring, with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) now hosting its own Integral Intelligence and Analysis Bureau. Justice Department legal attachés (typically from the FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents have been posted for decades to selected US embassies around the world where their functions are most needed. Since the 9/11 attacks and the 2003 establishment of the DHS, representatives of that department have also been deployed to select embassies worldwide. In addition to their work enforcing US laws and securing foreign government cooperation with their law-enforcement tasks, reporting by representatives of these agencies represents another important contribution to the intelligence product – emanating from these "tenants" of US overseas diplomatic posts.

### Diplomats' Intelligence 'Allergy'

Despite the importance of intelligence for effective diplomacy, many professional diplomats – certainly in the US – harbor an aversion to intelligence activities. Even if they appreciate the information that the IC can provide, many diplomats have distaste for



intelligence operations and the operatives who mount and manage them. There are many sources for this attitude.

- First, many diplomats regard HUMINT as fundamentally immoral, involving, as it almost invariably does, suborning someone to betray his or her country for money or by exploiting some human appetite, vulnerability, or weakness.
- Second – and relatedly – diplomats often doubt the reliability of this type of human “intelligence” precisely because of the ways in which it is procured and the suspect motives of those who provide it. They not infrequently insist that there is little or nothing to be learned from such “intelligence” that can’t be learned from a careful reading of open sources and from diplomatic reporting. In a relatively contemporary context, such diplomats might point to the “intelligence” of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction program in Iraq – and its source promoted by the Iraqi National Congress that several Western intelligence services unfortunately relied upon – as a prime example of this critique.
- Diplomats can be resentful of playing “landlord” for intelligence agency components residing within (and, technically, compromising) their diplomatic missions. This can be especially true if secrecy and mistrust leave the ambassador substantially in the dark about key aspects of intelligence activities underway in his country of accreditation – or if he/she is on the receiving end of nasty surprises, courtesy of their resident intelligence components.
- And, of course, intelligence operations gone awry can damage diplomatic relations with host governments. These can sometimes be exaggerated for effect by host government leaders or amplified by domestic politics – as in recent years’ revelations of National Security Agency (NSA) “eavesdropping” on the cell phones of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Brazilian President Dilma Roussef, or the recent expulsion of the CIA station chief in Berlin over revelations that the CIA had recruited an employee of Germany’s Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) in the Chancellery. Covert actions often cause diplomatic problems. Many are not so “covert” (e.g., the Bay of Pigs, the “secret war” in Laos, support for the mujahedeen in Afghanistan versus the Soviets, or the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran). When they become known, covert actions can cause damaging waves of unwanted publicity and generate long-lasting enmity toward the US. A recent example is the revelation of non-judicial

renditions and CIA-run “black sites” for holding and interrogating international terrorists, which has led to European Parliament and other nations’ investigations. Such episodes disturb the smooth functioning of diplomatic relationships and leave “messes,” large or small, that diplomats have to clean up.

All of these elements tend to make many diplomats skeptical and averse to intelligence operations, especially in their countries of accreditation or responsibility. And this aversion/caution need not apply only to human source activities or on-the-ground technical collections or covert operations. As the 2001 Chinese interception and forced landing of a US Navy P-3 surveillance aircraft underscored, even airborne technical intelligence collection – ostensibly out of the reach of hostile governments – can lead to prolonged, thorny, and delicate problems requiring diplomatic resolution – and under conditions of dramatically reversed leverage. The many earlier antecedents – the famous 1960 U-2 incident and the Soviet capture of pilot Francis Gary Powers, the (possibly mistaken) Israeli attack on the USS Liberty during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the North Korean capture of the USS Pueblo and its crew in 1968 – are reminders of the ever-present possibilities for a recurrence – particularly as US forces become more thinly spread and deployed in non-combat, support roles in theaters worldwide.

### Diplomatic ‘Successes’— Intelligence ‘Headaches’

“Peace Is Our Profession” was the motto of the former US Air Force Strategic Air Command. Ask any diplomat, and he/she would probably consider that the Air Force stole their motto. Diplomats usually see themselves as constantly striving for peace – for the harmonious and agreeable working together of nations on the world’s shared problems; for the peaceful resolution of international disputes; for the non-violent, eventual removal or replacement of the world’s most inhumane and human-rights-abusing governments and leaders with more humane successors – all through patient diplomatic persuasion and perhaps some economic and public diplomacy pressure.

One area of diplomatic endeavor that has been associated in the popular imagination with “peace” efforts for well over a century has been the forging of arms control agreements – bilateral and multi-lateral – and of multi-lateral nonproliferation agreements, mentioned earlier. As discussed, these agreements

depend critically on verification for their effectiveness – and this has been one of the key ways in which intelligence provides indispensable support to diplomacy. But by the same token, in this area, diplomacy can create some real “headaches” and challenges for the IC.

Diplomats like international consensus – and are usually prepared to engage internationally in the equivalent of legislative “log-rolling” that is often necessary to achieve it. Which is, in part, how projects for major international conventions get going and pick up steam. Sometimes these visionary projects, invented for the welfare of mankind and the peace and good order of the planet, actually achieve their targets. Numerous examples can be found – from the Geneva Conventions on the Law of War and the Treatment of Prisoners of War to the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Practices right down to the more recent UN Conventions Against Corruption and Against Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, and the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to name a few. Of course, it is not uncommon for new international convention projects to become freighted with ulterior and problematic agendas – particularly those whose effects would end up giving additional comfort and security to repressive regimes by, for instance, hobbling dissent or press freedoms, or weakening the economies of the Western democracies. A celebrated 1980s example of this was the New World Information Order promoted by UNESCO – an initiative that was fundamentally shot down during the Reagan Administration and prompted a roughly 20-year hiatus in US participation in that international body.

Sometimes, though, these visionary diplomatic projects can also have problematic implications for the IC. In years past, the UN Outer Space Treaty and Law of the Sea Treaty posed problems and challenges for some actual or potential US uses of these vast zones for assorted technologically advanced and imaginative intelligence collection efforts. The potential for adverse implications or (perhaps unintended) complications for intelligence collections efforts from international treaties has come into play most often in connection with efforts to define the limits of, access to, and “rules of the road” for “international commons” like the high seas or outer space. However, the progressive blurring of the lines between intelligence collection and law enforcement information, thanks to the growing and linked threats of terrorism, narcotics, (and even human) trafficking, and other criminality transcending national borders,

means that such international initiatives as the 2002 establishment of the International Criminal Court can have repercussions for intelligence or even law enforcement agents abroad engaged in high-stakes, high-risk operations. Generally, the implications of these ambitious projects for the IC and its operations are among the last and least of diplomatic considerations. As often as not, these end up being illuminated in the course of addressing the Defense Department’s larger concerns over their implications for military operations and personnel in the course of their duties on overseas deployments.

Obviously, once entered into, these international covenants – their restrictions, limitations, and requirements – are one more item that must be factored into intelligence plans and programs.

Bilateral and multi-lateral arms control and non-proliferation agreements, mentioned earlier, can also be a source of “headaches” for the IC in several ways.

- First, while such treaties’ verification provisions are not defined in a vacuum, without IC input or advice – considering diplomacy as “the art of the possible” – at the end of the day, the IC is inevitably “on the hook” to devise ways and means of verifying such treaties’ provisions to some reasonable level of confidence. That can be quite a challenge – one in which the IC is an advisor but not the designer or arbiter of the final outcome.
- Second, since ratification of such treaties – especially bilateral arms control agreements with Russia, but also such multi-lateral conventions as a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty – is highly political, the IC is regularly put “on the spot” to “certify” the treaty’s verifiability. This issue can become a political football. The administration responsible for negotiating the treaty expects the IC’s “seal of approval” for its verifiability. Meanwhile, the administration’s opposition in Congress can be quite adept at ferreting out dissenting or skeptical views within the IC, particularly if the treaty’s verification provisions seem inadequate or rely excessively on trusting the “other side.”
- Finally, there is the proverbial “hot potato” of evidence of the “other side” cheating on such agreements. When such evidence arises – birthed up by – yes – the IC – a flurry of politically charged questions arise – both within the community itself and between the community and the rest of the US national security apparatus that it serves. How strong and conclusive is the evidence? What action does it merit vis-à-vis the White House and the State and Defense

Departments? How will it be handled in dealing with the violating party – diplomatically and otherwise? What if it is “leaked” by a source – within the administration or Congress – to “prove a point” either about the violator’s perfidy and aggressiveness or about the weakness and timidity of the administration’s response? Every such instance, in this verification context, constitutes a major potential “headache” for the Intelligence Community.

Beyond these canonical problems there are two fundamental dilemmas that lie at the root of the intelligence-policy (which is to say, also, diplomatic) nexus. As discussed, effective intelligence is essential for policymakers – and diplomats, who may be as much policy implementers as they are policymakers. Yet, in the face of policy reversals or failures, policymakers are constantly tempted – and often give in to the temptation – to blame those reversals and failures on the IC. Claims of being misled, of having inaccurate information, of “politicized” intelligence, etc. have repeatedly been deployed in modern American history to “explain” failed or counter-productive policies. And the policy failures regularly laid at the IC’s doorstep often lead to sensational revelations – either by official leaks or self-appointed “watchdogs” – from Daniel Ellsberg to Edward Snowden – of intelligence programs supposedly “gone bad.” Such revelations usually redound to the detriment of future access to information sources and channels that have been “blown” or lead to new legislative, judicially determined, regulatory or policy limitations on “what can be done” by US intelligence agencies. Yet, the IC is expected to accurately anticipate the next crisis, the next threat to national security, the next 9/11 attack, as if none of this self-justifying damage had occurred. And, rather like a whipped dog that nevertheless has no alternative but to remain loyal to his master, the IC will endeavor, despite the “feast and famine” budget oscillations of the last 40 years, to rise to the occasion of the next crisis – whatever it is.

## Conclusion

Intelligence and diplomacy are locked in a marriage. Not a marriage of convenience. Rather the opposite: a marriage of necessity. Like all such marriages, it is not entirely comfortable for either party. There are significant frictions and differences of outlook that accompany the mutual dependency. Some of these “come with the territory”; others are generated, more or less regularly (though not necessarily consciously or purposely) as a natural by-product of

that partner’s normal work. Like all such marriages, patience, perseverance, a dedicated quest for mutual understanding, and a shared dedication to a common goal are necessary for the marriage to be fruitful and productive. And that’s the imperative of intelligence professionals and diplomats working together to assure US national security.

## Readings for Instructors

The complex relationship between diplomacy and intelligence reflects some of the complexity that exists within the US Governmental agencies and processes related to national security. Recommended for instructors is Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof (eds.), *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011) with a foreword by former national security advisor, Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.). ✎

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