

## CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITY

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***Abstract:** In this paper, in which I will consider the relation between national cultures and intelligence cultures as subsets of nations' strategic cultures, I address three topics regarding cultural influences on intelligence activity. First, the 'for whom'-question gets far too little attention in intelligence studies, although it has a major impact on the self-concept of people working in intelligence, the roles they play, the work they do and the way they legitimize their activities. Second, threats are still too often seen as hard-boiled facts in intelligence studies, the only question being whether intelligence organizations detect them early enough. Third, developments in the task environment of intelligence and security organizations will increasingly collide with ideas and opinions from the same organizations' value environments..*

***Keywords:** culture; intelligence; strategy*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the short time allotted to me I would like to address three topics regarding cultural influences on intelligence activity. First, the 'for whom'-question gets far too little attention in intelligence studies, although it has a major impact on the self-concept of people working in intelligence, the roles they play, the work they do and the way they legitimize their activities. Second, threats are still too often seen as hard-boiled facts in intelligence studies, the only question being whether intelligence organizations detect them early enough. However, the way we perceive and discuss threats is very much influenced by our cultural climate and surroundings. Third, developments in the task environment of intelligence and security organizations will increasingly collide with ideas and opinions from the same organizations' value environments. If we want to establish if there are cultural influences on intelligence activity and if so, which ones, we will first have to define culture for our present purposes. I understand culture to be the way of life and in this case especially the beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. This particular group is in my case especially the nation. So I will be talking mainly about national cultures and about intelligence cultures as a subset of these nations' strategic cultures.

### 2. INTELLIGENCE IN ITS ENVIRONMENT(S)

It has always been my understanding that an intelligence organization should be understood not

as an institution in itself, but in its relationship with its environment.(de Graaff, 2014:1-13). However, whereas it is rather easy to establish the boundaries of an organization, it is harder to circumscribe an environment. I would like to discern two types of environment: a task environment and a value environment. The task environment consists of all the actors whose actions may be or will be relevant to an organization, either by influencing it or by being influenced by it. E.g. a radicalizing bunch of youngsters that may turn into a terrorist group or a civil conflict in a nearby part of the world which may have consequences for migration patterns and ensuing tensions in one's own country may have an impact on intelligence activities or at least it should have. The latter is extremely important because an intelligence or security organization may not timely detect an upcoming threat or it may be under political pressure to deny the new phenomenon taking shape. Also, an intelligence organization's counter-radicalization approach may affect many more people than those who are already radicalizing or who potentially will. It may have an effect on the broader social environment of the target group or even on society as a whole (de Graaff, 2010:249-273). This implies that researchers, commentators or observers should not depart their research or observations from an intelligence organization's outlook, but instead formulate an independent personal view on the organization's task environment.

However, even though views on the task environment are in the eye of the beholder, the task

environment can to a certain extent be established empirically. Terrorist attacks do take place or they do not. Wars are fought or not. And so on. And in a globalizing world some threats are common to many, most or all countries, such as Islamist terror, populism or climate change. They can be felt in the United States, Europe, Russia and China. As I will show in a moment, this does not mean that the task environment is free from cultural influences.

However, the tendency of most of us would be to start looking for cultural influences in the value environment. The value environment is that part of the environment that constitutes the cultural and ideological climate in which an organization has to operate. It makes a major difference whether an intelligence or security organization operates as part of a dictatorship or as part of a democracy. Values do impose themselves on intelligence organizations, through politics, through oversight committees, through the judiciary, through the media, through opinion polls or referenda, through leadership that is parachuted on top of the organization from outside and by members of the organizations themselves, who may be confronted with opinions about the workings of their organizations by family members or acquaintances. Nothing seems so influential on an organization member's ideas as a heated discussion with his or her teenage son or daughter the night before about what kind of work (s)he is doing and why.

### **3. FOR WHOM?**

The why and the for whom questions are seldom addressed in intelligence studies, even though here we may find one of the main cultural differences having an impact on the way intelligence is done in a country. When I ask Dutch students who have a career in intelligence for whom they think they ultimately do their intelligence work, some answer 'for the minister', others 'for the government' and still others 'for the state'. When I confront them with the fact that they work for the same or similar state agencies and when I then ask them whether their different answers imply that they do things differently from each other, they are confused. This gives me an opportunity to say that it does make a difference whether one works for the current government or for the more or less immortal state and that substantial political debates have been held in e.g. the United Kingdom or The Netherlands about the question whether the government, the state or an abstract notion such as national security or national welfare should be the ultimate goal of a state agency's intelligence work.

Then I confuse my students further by continuing to ask for whom or what the German security service works, the answer being the constitution, as is implied in its name Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) or Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution. I then have to explain that after 1945 the (West-)German notion of citizenship was based firmly on the constitution, a legal document that does not exist as such in the UK. Subsequently, I use an example from the movie *Clear and Present Danger*, based on the novel by Tom Clancy of the same name, to demonstrate that although the oath officials of the US intelligence community take refers to the constitution their notion of the ultimate objective is 'the American people'. This also explains why it is much more normal in the US to have people from the intelligence community criticizing their president, if they think their national leader does not act in the interests of the American people. My next step is to explain to my students that in Germany for instance the idea that an intelligence or security service would work for the people is abhorred after the experience with both the Nazi system, where people were condemned to death by sentences that began with the words 'In the name of the German people', and the East-German communist era, where people's parties, people's armies and people's police were the strong arms of a repressive regime. And in spite of their professed commitments to the people, the secret services of both the Nazi and the communist regimes acted not so much on behalf of either the people or the state but in the interest of the sole or dominant party. Consequently, I would argue for paying much more attention to this 'for whom'-question in our intelligence teachings and training than the more or less obligatory statement that intelligence is intended to create knowledge that should provide a decision-advantage for policy-makers or other intelligence consumers.

### **4. CONSTRUCTIVISM IN STEAD OF REALISM**

Now let me return to the idea that the task environment is free from cultural influences. It is not. For too long the international relations theory that has been favored most by intelligence studies is that of realism. This could be true as long as, during the Cold War, the main opponents were primarily interested in each other's capacities, taking their intentions for granted. Counting numbers of missiles, their (nuclear) payload and multiply the two amounted to a kind of bean-counting, which allowed intelligence producers to write their reports

and send them off hoping that the intelligence consumers would take note. Intelligence gathering and analysis amounted to the making of puzzles. Questions were directed towards the finding of missing pieces. Today's questions take the shape of mysteries or wicked problems. They start with contradicting definitions of the problem, they ask for changing not so much the facts but the narratives and they demand not only an assessment of the opponent and his intentions but also of the actions of one's intelligence consumers, in other words: they ask for a net assessment.

This type of intelligence-gathering and intelligence fits much better within the domain of the theory of constructivism. A threat is not a threat per se, but it is a threat because it has been construed and prioritized as such. Is terrorism, migration or cyber the biggest threat? This is a man-made decision, not just by the opponent, but also within an intelligence producer's own culture. And more: the intelligence producer takes part in this debate; he helps to create the narrative by communicating threat assessments or publishing annual reports. The task environment nowadays requires that the intelligence producers communicate with the consumers before they produce their final briefs or reports. If they would conclude that Islamic State is a group of religious fanatics, while their consumers have already accepted the idea that they are a bunch of criminals it will be hard to get the intelligence producers' findings accepted by their consumers. So, ideally, they would have to sit together and arrive at a common definition and interpretation of security threats before the intelligence producers start writing their reports.

## 5. COLLIDING ENVIRONMENTS

However, would citizens accept that intelligence people sit together with their elected

representatives? After all, interpretation is a political act. Is it acceptable that intelligence producers participate in this act? Does not this development, which seems so logical from the perspective of the task environment, constitute a major infringement upon the separation between intelligence-production and policy-making? Will the acceptance of such a deviation from past practices be evenly accepted by the value environment in all cultures, independent from whether people think intelligence is produced for the state, the government, the constitution, the people or the party? Will this not mean that intelligence services will have to communicate much more than ever before to explain the public what role they play in specific dossiers? And will the intelligence community's clients allow them to fulfil that new role, independent from the fact whether the clients are the state, the government, the constitution, the people or the party?

I hope my three questions have given you food for thought and will contribute to an interesting conference.

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