The Effectiveness of Intelligence Organizations: Beyond Individual Successes and Failures

The study of intelligence has largely been the study of intelligence success and failure—mostly the latter—rather than of intelligence services. To the extent scholars analyze intelligence services as organizations; it is usually in the context of a specific intelligence failure. The context usually implies organizational roots to the failure, making bureaucracy appear as a ubiquitous barrier to successful intelligence. Such single incident assessment does an injustice to origins of organizational study, when Max Weber predicted bureaucracies would become the dominant form of administration because they offered the most efficient means to fulfill administrative tasks. Failure is only part of the organizational story; bureaucracies do not develop procedures to fail. Where organizational factors explain some failures; those same factors also must explain some success.

In the United States, the cycles of intelligence failure and organizational reform focus discussion around the specific failure at the expense of the larger question: what makes an intelligence organization successful over time? Effectiveness implies some notion of efficiency in translating resources into results, but the traditional quantitative metrics for administrative effectiveness rarely apply to intelligence. The value of intelligence information is internal to the reports themselves, relative to the existing of the knowledge of decision makers. This essay takes a first step toward understanding how to evaluate the quality of an intelligence service by breaking down performance-related questions across the tasks of intelligence.

Intelligence, to paraphrase Carl Von Clausewitz, belongs to the realm of chance and uncertainty. As former British SIS chief Sir Richard Dearlove wrote, useful agents only agree to espionage when “asked in the right way, by the right person, at the right time.” Similarly situational characterizations of other collection disciplines and analysis also are warranted. Intelligence analysts may bristle at such a judgment, but projecting the past and present into the future is uncertain even if history is all we have. No epistemological tools or analytic tradecraft can resolve this problem. Intelligence failures frequently occur in parallel to changes in how adversaries view and act upon their interests—or, put another way, when intelligence targets break with past behavior.

Accepting chance as an essential element of intelligence means analyzing intelligence services in terms of opportunities created—rather than specific outputs and single incidents—and intelligence services’ capability to execute. An effective intelligence service routinely creates and, hopefully, exploits opportunities for successful collection, analysis, and transmission. At a basic level, the intelligence process is about making connections—decision makers and information; collectors and analysts; sources and collectors—which is probably why the Chinese characterize intelligence as a process of transmission. The creation and exploitation of opportunities however leaves out an important element of intelligence work: sifting signals from

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4 David Hume first incisively elaborated this problem in his essay An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. Judgments about the future can only be logically justified on the basis of past experience, but the future’s departures from past continuity surprise us. As Mark Lowenthal noted, intelligence analysts can fulfill all of the established analytic standards—proper characterization of sources, logical argumentation, relevance, distinguishing assumptions from facts and judgments, etc—but still fail to anticipate important developments or accurately understand the present. See, Lowenthal, “Toward a Reasonable Standard for Analysis: How Right, How Often on Which Issues?” Intelligence and National Security 23, No. 3 (June 2008), 308–309.
5 The Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates this problem quite clearly. The infamous Special National Intelligence Estimate of September 19, 1962, which concluded Soviet policy was inconsistent with placing nuclear weapons in Cuba, was only wrong about Soviet motivations between May and October 1962. The analysts in Office of National Estimates were right about Soviet policy both before and long after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The change in policy only occurred because the Soviet military persuaded Nikita Khrushchev that the delivery of missiles to Cuba could proceed unprotected after his initial rejection of this risky idea. For how the analysis was conceived on the US side, see Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived: Cuban Missile Crisis” (Studies in Intelligence 8, No. 2, Spring 1964), 111–119. For perspective on the Soviet policy change, see James Hansen, “Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis: Learning from the Past” (Studies in Intelligence 46, no. 1 2002), 49–50; Timothy Naftali and Aleksandr Fursenko, One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958–1964 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 184–215.
6 I deliberately choose transmission over the more typical dissemination. Dissemination means “to spread” or “to disperse” without implying reception. Transmission implies both sending and receiving as a process. For the same reasons, intelligence scholars Jennifer Sims and Li Naiguo independently decided to emphasize “transmission.”
The ability to evaluate and dismiss false intelligence reporting rapidly also is an important component of intelligence work, because a lot of intelligence reporting is suspect even if not false.7

This first part of this essay addresses the main themes in intelligence studies, which, while relevant to intelligence organizations, have skirted the organizational issues required to implement their findings to improve effectiveness. The second part shows why assuming decision makers will recognize good intelligence when they see it is no basis for evaluating the performance of intelligence services. The third and longest part outlines a new way to evaluate the effectiveness of intelligence organizations across the various levels of intelligence activity.

**Foreign vs. Security Intelligence and Scope**

This essay examines the effectiveness of national intelligence organizations at informing senior civilian and military decision makers. Informing decision makers about developments related to foreign policy interests—so-called “foreign intelligence”—is a mission distinct from many aspects of what Michael Herman labeled “security intelligence,” which covers counterterrorism, counterintelligence, counter-proliferation, and counter-narcotics. Although both forms involve informing decision makers, the main practical distinction between “foreign intelligence” and “security intelligence” is the intelligence services’ responsibility to take action in security intelligence. The word “intelligence” in academic and public discourse usually refers to foreign intelligence.

Security intelligence probably is more comparable to the processes of tactical and operational military intelligence in the field. Action and intelligence coalesce within an organizational unit to fulfill identified objectives, even if these objectives are broader than are typical of a military unit, e.g. preventing terrorist attacks or defeating an enemy force. In contrast, foreign intelligence usually operates with a great degree organizational separation from the responsibility to act. To some degree, the requirements of foreign and security intelligence overlap, but the concreteness inherent in the latter offers an additional means validation. When a

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7 Although Roberta Wohlstetter in *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* provided the first clear elaboration of the signals-noise problem, Carl von Clausewitz highlighted the intrinsic unreliability of intelligence reports and how few reports might be relevant. See, Victor Rosello, “Clausewitz’s Contempt for Intelligence,” *Parameters* 21 (Spring 1991), 103–114.
terrorist plot is disrupted, an intelligence service often will find proof of the plot’s existence, such as plotters themselves and paraphernalia. Good foreign intelligence reporting may be spur action that negates the danger, becoming a self-negating prophecy with few discernible signs of change.  

**Bringing the Services Back Into Intelligence Studies**

Three themes dominate the intelligence literature: intelligence failure, normative conceptions of intelligence, and oversight. Rarely do intelligence organizations themselves—rather than just the people in them—actually figure in the intelligence literature. All three themes do highlight that organizations are involved in the intelligence process, but rarely are the effects of bureaucratic wrangling considered or the interplay between the personal dimensions of politics and bureaucratic dimensions of modern intelligence.

Swedish intelligence scholar Wilhelm Agrell noted that without intelligence failure, intelligence studies as an academic discipline would not exist. While case studies of intelligence failure are historically interesting, they repeatedly produce the same cognitive, epistemological, and social behavioral errors. These processing errors are endemic to the human condition and decision making under uncertainty. While a review of the intelligence literature might identify a few sparse writings on an ideal intelligence service, studies of failure focus on the human elements of failure even if suggested reforms are mostly organizational. The result is that organizational reforms are not tailored to address the faulty elements of the human condition.

Single incidents of failure—depending in part on how significant they are—often mislead analysts in terms of context and the resources an intelligence service could reasonably devote to the incident. Intelligence services help manage risk, which leads to counterintuitive assessments

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of significance and where resources should be devoted.\textsuperscript{11} High-quality information relating to a radicalized teenager plotting to set off a bomb may be less significant than low quality (but still credible) information relating to a plot to set off a bomb among the crowd at the presidential inauguration. The potential consequences of even low probability events may outweigh more credible information that is less consequential.\textsuperscript{12} Simply focusing on a single failure and the steps leading to it may not cover many important aspects of an intelligence service’s actions at the time, and, in some cases, partial successes while solving an intelligence problem highlights failure more clearly for external observers than total failure.\textsuperscript{13}

The normative analysis of intelligence has helped clarify the role and requirements of intelligence, but has failed to provide an organizational component to complement normative propositions. For example, Jennifer Sims identifies the key steps in the intelligence process as collection, anticipation, counterintelligence, and transmission. In many ways the normative debate remains trapped in a discussion of the meaning of intelligence and clarifying intelligence as forms knowledge, organization, and process without linking these together with policymaking in a coherent bureaucratic-political picture.\textsuperscript{14} Even if some analytic steps have been taken in this regard, they remain inchoate.\textsuperscript{15}

The scholarship on intelligence oversight has focused on restraining abuses within intelligence services and restraining the leaders enchanted with the idea of covert action to save a failing policy. This set of literature found its roots in the failures and overreach of covert action, because of many of the authors’ experience as participants in the oversight investigations in the


\textsuperscript{12} I would like to thank Jeff Friedman and Richard Zuckhauser at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard for drawing my attention back to this important point.

\textsuperscript{13} Omand, \textit{Securing the State}, 240–243.


1970s or as government critics. Covert action is simply the most noticeable part of the secret activities of intelligence services, but, for the sake of democratic accountability, the secrecy intrinsic to intelligence services requires oversight. It is also a policy function, statutorily recognized in democratic states as a legitimate area for legislative oversight. Executive officials use and processing of information however gets onto much shakier ground, especially because of the difficulty of tracking the interactions.

Oversight includes both a control and enabling function and the attention ensuring intelligence services’ compliance with democratic governance comes at the expense of ensuring their effectiveness. Too often, the oversight literature states democracy and secrecy involve tradeoffs that reduce intelligence effectiveness without further specific explanation of effectiveness. Few mainstream thinkers would suggest the transparency rights enjoyed by citizens in a democratic society should be extended to foreign nationals and governments—at least, so long as sovereignty is an operating concept. Accepting secrecy as a necessary element of some intelligence collection, how exactly does greater interaction between intelligence organizations and the officials temporarily endowed with the people’s sovereignty reduce the effectiveness of the organization? Arguably, the unwillingness to define how an effective intelligence service should perform is the reason for this omission and the justification for the following analysis.

**Effectiveness: You Won't Know When You See It**

Few scholars have tempted to stare down the barrel of intelligence success, much less effectiveness. Existing treatments—cursory as most of them are—usually paraphrase and elaborate on Henry Kissinger’s famous quip about good intelligence: “I’ll know it when I see it.” Not only is this answer unsatisfying from an academic perspective, but it is also wrong. Intelligence is not pornography. Policymakers are not endowed with superhuman decision-making capacity or a unique ability to identify exactly the kind of information they need to

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choose one policy option over another. Even if they could, uncertainty about cause and effect as well as other actors’ future responses precludes perfectly rational choices. Ironically, the same cognitive psychology literature invoked to explain intelligence failures demonstrates policymakers may not, in fact, know good intelligence when they see it.

As organizational theorist Herbert Simon fundamentally reshaped the rational actor model, he noted a human would require god-like powers of cognition to grasp and evaluate all the alternatives in a given situation. Biases in thinking are not intentional, but rather products of the environment and exacerbated by decision makers’ need to have confidence in the self-perceived data-based nature of their decisions rather than introspect. Such un-motivated biases “are the products of the complexity of the environment, the inherent limitations on cognitive capabilities, and the [satisficing] strategies to overcome them.” 18 The human willingness to manipulate information consciously or unconsciously varies with personality type, time pressures, initial impressions (and related cognitive closure), and the social milieu with an inclination to seek consistency for easy decisions. 19

The limits of policymaker understanding also limit the potential for successful intelligence—including both policy support and warning—sometimes placing intelligence services in the awkward position of delivering valuable material, but unable to catalyze policy action or understanding. Policymakers have the right or the moral competency to be wrong, and intelligence officials walk a fine line between persuasion and policy advocacy. Intelligence memoirs often contain complaints of this dilemma and the double-standard under which intelligence officers must disclose their thinking in detail but policymakers do not justify their opinions. 20

Sometimes intelligence services provide information beyond the ken or imagination of policymakers or other senior decision makers, leading to a failure of intelligence. Such was the fate of the French Deuxieme Bureau ahead of World War II. Despite excellent analysis of new

German military capabilities and doctrine, the French General Staff and civilian overseers failed to understand the potentialities of combined arms warfare, dogmatically insisting on the primacy of defense. As one senior French intelligence officer commented on German blitzkrieg against Poland, “only the Poles and our General Staff were surprised.” To fault French intelligence for the sins of military decision makers would be unfair. This episode proves the point that intelligence consumers can fail to understand good intelligence and that good intelligence is not self-evident. Additional examples are easy to find such failures of comprehension when intelligence services provided vital information. Good intelligence, then, also requires good decision makers.

Unraveling Intelligence Success: Conceptual and Institutional Demarcation

There are four basic informational goals that have been given for intelligence that provide some idea of what success looks like:

1. Reduce uncertainty;
2. Extracting certainty (establishing the facts on the grounds);
3. Actionable information;
4. Decision advantage.

The various definitions of intelligence as information in support of decision-making to reduce uncertainty set a low standard for success that does not necessarily preclude a serious

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intelligence failure as the competition plays out. Prior to World War II, U.S. human, technical, and open-source collection provided a great deal of information on Japanese doctrine, military modernization, and even plans. Even after Pearl Harbor, some of this collection continued to provide insight, most notably the diplomatic and military ciphers.\textsuperscript{26} If reducing uncertainty is taken as a baseline for success, the questions should be whether the intelligence service over time provided information that fills in gaps in decision makers’ knowledge.

The “actionable intelligence” standard fits well with a military decision-making environment, because it focuses intelligence on existing plans, intentions, changes in disposition, and capabilities. At a national level, this may not be a feasible standard. Most civilian governments have a far-less unified chain of command and decision-making process than even that facing a campaign commander. If one of the valuable roles of intelligence in government is establishing a standard situational awareness, then the actionable definition moves intelligence services away from serving this useful function.

Using decision advantage as a standard expands the scope of intelligence beyond the limited scope addressed here. Although this is a useful concept because it places intelligence explicitly within a competitive context, there is a question about the scope and nature of the competition. To use once again the U.S.-Japanese competition of the 1920s to 1945, how do we choose what matters? This definition however does distance observers from single events, like Pearl Harbor, which is the purpose of the discussion here.

Apart from success in theory, intelligence services operate in a political environment with varying definitions of success. The most common discussion of this in the intelligence literature relates to the moving and invisible bar of expectations, such as the calls of failure in the wake of the Indian nuclear test in 1998.\textsuperscript{27} Even if an intelligence service cannot escape fluctuating expectations, there is still a distinct institutional mission. The United States created the CIA to centralize information flow to provide warning and to prevent another Pearl Harbor. That goal has stayed with American perceptions and expectations of the CIA. Other intelligence services

have similar origin-related missions, such as the Soviet Cheka (internal security) and the Chinese Ministry of State Security (counterespionage and domestic intelligence).\textsuperscript{28} As the section above on why effective intelligence collection is not always recognizable suggests, intelligence success does not have an absolute, objective meaning. Whether failed, met, or exceeded, these expectations have real implications for an intelligence services’ ability to be effective in the political-social and strategic domains discussed below.

Each of these definitions has its problems; however, the more cautious reduction of uncertainty or establishment of a basic set of facts should stand. Intelligence services should aim to meet the political expectations to preserve their status as well as to give their decision makers an advantage in negotiation, conflict, or other relevant/designated competitions. This may include actionable information or it may not.

**Levels of Analysis**

Intelligence activity occurs at three levels—tactical, operational, and strategic—and an intelligence service’s effectiveness can vary across these levels. The political relationship between intelligence services and the national leadership also affects the resources, responsibilities, and expectations of the services.\textsuperscript{29} Intelligence services, arguably much more so than militaries, operate in an explicitly political environment. Unlike national military organizations, intelligence services do not have a monopoly (or near monopoly) on many of their capabilities and responsibilities. The rest of this essay will follow these levels from the political-social down to the tactical.

**Political-Social Effectiveness:**

The political-social effectiveness of intelligence organizations covers the ability of the services to secure necessary resources. Intelligence services do not require the same industrial and technological investment—and consequently political and social investment—as military organizations.\textsuperscript{30} However, intelligence organizations still have material and personnel


\textsuperscript{29} The basics of this framework are borrowed from Allan Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth Watman, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations” (*International Security* 11, No. 1, Summer 1986), 37–71.

requirements and, because they often lack the near monopoly of military organizations in their field, they arguably operate with greater non-material political needs. Information, analysis, and the availability of both are intrinsically political in a government setting when so much is at stake amid ambiguity and uncertainty. Because of the problems of accountability in this environment, intelligence services need to have high political status secure the necessary if intangible resources to perform effectively at other levels.

*To what extent is an intelligence service able to ensure high political status?*

Status is needed to ensure access and ensure the voice of intelligence is never silenced for the wrong reasons. In order for transmission to succeed, intelligence organizations need officers and leaders who can credibly cut into busy decision makers’ schedules whenever needed and who possess recognized intellectual and/or political gravitas sufficient to maintain a voice in senior decision-making circles. Intelligenc should not be just another voice or source of information in policymaking. One intelligence analyst told this author “Our job is not to be praised but to be indispensable. Whether they love us or hate us, [policymakers] should still want us in the room.” Although status can depend on repeated successes, the stature of an intelligence service can and does come frequently from other factors.

Some intelligence chiefs use their personalities and positions to strengthen the influence of intelligence services. In other cases, they use their relationship to key decision makers to cement access to policy meetings. In the United States, Bill Casey comes to mind. He served as campaign manager to President Ronald Reagan and successfully argued for getting cabinet-level status. On the extreme side, some intelligence chiefs improve the status of the service by using its capabilities to support the political agenda of senior policymakers or spy on their opponents. Chinese intelligence chief Kang Sheng is legendary for such abuses and using the Social Affairs Department as an ideological police force to purge opponents of Mao Zedong.32

*To what extent is an intelligence service able to recruit the people with the appropriate skill sets and ability into its ranks?*

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Intelligence organizations require the intensive cultivation and use of people and their skills. As with military needs for the officer corps, intelligence services require the willing service of the educated, skilled, and traveled middle and upper classes. Intelligence services need to be seen as legitimate organizations with legitimate purposes worthy of citizens aspiring to a government career or protect the nation. The language, social, engineering, research, and other skills necessary for intelligence all require a relatively high level of education. To recruit member of foreign countries’ elite, they must be asked, as Dearlove suggested, by the “right person,” and the right person often must have sense of what motivates people in a position of privilege or social mobility. The best illustration of this is to compare what is known about Soviet case officers before and after World War II as well the relative successes at penetrating Western governments. The so-called “Great Illegals” of the 1930s were capable of being professors at Cambridge and recognized journalists; whereas, the next generation of case officers, despite their education, grew up entirely behind the Iron Curtain and lacked the same awareness of their adversary, limiting their effectiveness.

Intellectual prowess and, hopefully, consequent expertise also enable intelligence organizations to function in the domestic decision-making process. A persistent problem in policymaker perceptions of intelligence is that they do not see the practical value of organized intelligence analysis. Policymakers often see themselves as experts by virtue of their daily engagement with policy problems and contacts with foreign leaders. Intelligence officers who engage decision makers have to be able to perform as intellectual and substantive peers worthy of professional respect.

Intelligence services may have little control over the social standing, which can rise and fall in the cycles of social politics. In the early days of the Cold War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) attracted the elite of the United States. When anti-war sentiment and abuses of CIA appeared in the late 1960s and 1970s, CIA’s ability to attract new members from elite educational institutions declined with the agency’s social standing. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 rejuvenated CIA in public eyes as it led the counterattack against Al Qaeda

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33 Millett et al, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations”, 42.  
in Afghanistan. College graduates over the last decade considered CIA to be one of the most
desirable public or private organizations to work for.

*To what extent is an intelligence service able to maintain some autonomy over its resource
distribution and workload?*

When intelligence services must respond to the beck and call of decision makers, the
focus on immediate policy needs consumes resources that otherwise might be spent on horizon
scanning and identifying emerging threats. Autonomy for warning and responsiveness to policy
are competing demands upon intelligence services that require tradeoffs.35 This autonomy may
be related to other questions here, including the degree of professionalization and the level of
trust between policymakers and the intelligence services. The natural tendency of decision
makers is to draw intelligence resources into their decision-making process. Given that warning
disrupts existing policy processes and requires independence, policymakers need to have strong
reasons—possibly ranging from trust to status to bureaucratic position—to resist their inclination.

*To what extent is an intelligence service a mission-oriented (vice rules-oriented) organization?*

Intelligence services have a broad and ambiguous mission—usually some variation on
protecting the national security of their country—which requires adaptability and flexibility.36
For example, an intelligence service needs to be able to identify and serve new decision makers
who lack the political power to compel intelligence service support.37 This expansive mandate
creates a performance-measurement problem, which, if handled poorly, can redefine the mission
in parochial and unproductive ways. The value of intelligence is internal to the intelligence
product, making quantitative measurements misleading as to the importance and relevance of
intelligence to decisions. Too much attention to traditional, quantitative public administration

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35 Sims, “A Theory of Intelligence in International Politics,” 71–77; Philip Tetlock and Barbara Mellers,
“Structuring Accountability Systems in Organizations: Key Tradeoffs and Critical Unknowns,” in *Intelligence
Analysis: Behavioral and Social Scientific Foundations*, eds., Baruch Fischhoff and Cherie Chauvin (Washington,
Information*, 223.

36 Sherman Kent noted how broad the intelligence mission was when wrote an intelligence literature must “deal with
first principles. A portion of it will certainly have to deal with the fundamental problem of what we are trying to do.
What is our mission? And as soon as that question is submitted to careful analysis, there is no telling what will emerge.
One thing I think is certain: that is, that we have many more than a single mission…” “The Need for an
Intelligence Literature” (*Studies in Intelligence* 1, no. 1, Fall 1955), 5.

37 Jennifer Sims, “A Theory of Intelligence in International Politics,”; For one example, see Holt, *Secret Intelligence
and Public Policy*, 82-83.
measurements shifts an intelligence service along the so-called mission-rules continuum away from outcomes and toward procedure. Preserving the mission- and outcome-based orientation of the intelligence service helps an intelligence service be effective.

Mission-orientation also requires a certain degree of professionalization to create accountability among peers and to the intelligence service. Definitions of professionalism vary, but usually include some variation of the following trinity: social responsibility, corporate awareness, and technical expertise. Social responsibility refers to the allegiance of professionals to a higher purpose beyond themselves and their organization. Corporate awareness as a professional body refers to the awareness of members as functioning separate from normal citizens with a special task. Although critical observers concede intelligence officers the previous two points, intelligence officers may lack specialized expertise requiring specific education and training beyond what is normally accessible. The more important point, as Washington Platt argued most directly, is intelligence has the capacity to develop as a distinct professional discipline, which is a necessary development to protect intelligence services from certain damaging kinds of political interference.


40 This allegiance issue is especially important for organizations behavior in the domestic political context. The loyalty of the Prussian and German army to the commander-in-chief, rather than “the people,” created an instrument the responded to the political whims of the Kaiser or Adolf Hitler from the Napoleonic Era to the end of World War II, irrespective of society. The Prussian reformers who rejuvenated the military after the Battles of Jena and Auerstadt deliberately tried to incorporate a more liberal and democratic focus in the Prussian military and the *Landswehr* reservists. In the public uprising of 1848, the Prussian army put down the unrest violently, while the *Landswehr* refused such orders (not unlike local military units in China during the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989). See, Walter Goerlitz, *The History of the German General Staff, 1657–1945* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966), esp. 16–68.

41 Bar-Joseph, *Intelligence Intervention in Democratic States*, 47–58. If the emphasis in intelligence is all-source analysis, then there is no difference between academia and analysis. However, if intelligence is information collection, processing, and delivery; then intelligence becomes a much more specialized activity.

External political pressure for measurable accountability can strain professionalism and mission-orientation, and places intelligence managers in awkward position. Because of the dangers of mission-defining metrics to the detriment of other intelligence problems, intelligence managers should be able to defend their intelligence service to prevent procedural micromanagement. The best defense is recognized professionalism, because it facilitates a discussion between intelligence professionals with recognizable expertise and decision makers with the moral competence to pursue policy.\textsuperscript{43} This question may fit better at the strategic level, but, if an intelligence service lacks the political resources (a central question at this level) to engage in this discussion, then the other efforts to match intelligence operations with decision-making requirements are less relevant.

**Strategic-Mission Level: From Information to Intelligence**

The strategic or mission level of effectiveness is where intelligence activities and decision making come together. Decision makers and the competitions in which they engage determine how intelligence will useful or relevant. The question is how intelligence services operate, orient, and organize to meet these demands while maintaining enough autonomy to recognize impending competitions. Decision makers’ perceptions of the competition shape their expectations of intelligence support; however, as decision makers turn over and competitions evolve, intelligence services, too, must adapt to both new decision makers (with varying knowledge), different circumstances in the competitions in which they are engaged, and potentially new competitions.

\textsuperscript{43} This is not an argument for an intelligence version of Huntington’s concept of “objective control” over the military, which leaves war to the generals and politics to the civilians. In such specialized field as intelligence and war, expertise counts for something but the experts work best when working in tandem with policymakers. For a conceptual and empirical refutation of “objective control,” see, Eliot Cohen, \textit{Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime} (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), esp. 208–224, 241–267; and Peter Feaver, \textit{Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), esp. 16–53. Some research in public administration suggests, as Cohen does, that discussion moving both up and down large organizations increases effectiveness. See, Lance deHaven-Smith and Kenneth Jenne II, “Management by Inquiry: A Discursive Accountability System for Large Organizations,” \textit{Public Administration Review} (January/February 2006), 64–76.
This logic means an effective intelligence service cannot be effective or produce valuable strategic intelligence reporting and analysis without reference to factors beyond the intelligence service. The dynamics of intelligence services, decision makers, and competitions create a constant risk of a mismatch between them. The danger is not that an intelligence service risks its existence, but rather that they risk irrelevance by failing to generate information linked to decision makers and competition. Recurring irrelevance or gratuitous information is likely to lead to problems of transmission even when an intelligence service later produces important intelligence. As Chinese scholars have noted, intelligence is fundamentally a process of transmission, requiring both successful dissemination and reception. It is a back-and-forth dialogue about making sense of uncertainty. Preparing for successful intelligence transmission between the service and its decision makers is the question for determining the strategic effectiveness.

To what extent are the intelligence services structured toward the needs of policymakers?

Leaders usually create intelligence services—perhaps, more appropriately for this question, systems—with specific competitions in mind. These competitions or policy support expectations for intelligence services often change over time, requiring adaptation or realignment to support policy.

Orientation and structure can limit the opportunities intelligence services have to collect on topics of interest as well as their adaptability to new competitions. China’s Ministry of State Security (MSS), for example, probably has some difficulties collecting against foreign targets from its internally-oriented structure. In terms of purpose, structure, and political control, the MSS as an institution is geared toward countering threats to internal stability. Almost every known Chinese espionage case involves an agent identified through internal security surveillance. The only exceptions are recent or opportunistic reactions to a potential agent volunteering his services. To the extent the public record accurately reflect MSS operations, the MSS by only

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44 Zhang Shaojun, *Junshi qingbao xue* [The Study of Military Intelligence], (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2001), 2–3; Li Naiguo, *Junshi qingbao yanjiu* [Military Intelligence Research] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2001), 43.

45 The only examples are, reverse chronological order, General Lo Hsien-che (2011), Babur Maihesuti (2009), and Hou Desheng (1987). See, respectively, “Zhu mei guanyuan: Luo Xianzhe zhu tai fei zhu mei [TECRO Representative: Lo Hsien-che Posted to Thailand, Not United States],” *Zhongguo shibao* [China Times] (Taiwan),
recruiting persons with extended or regular time in China limits its ability to collect intelligence on subjects without a direct link to China. Aspiring “China Hands” go to China but rarely do others. While Beijing may have created the MSS to combat internal security threats, this legacy inhibits the MSS from meeting growing policymaker demands for foreign intelligence.  

To what extent is the intelligence service able to gain access to decision makers and be present during decision-making discussions?  

The challenges of transmission identified above make communication between an intelligence service and the decision makers it serves a strategic necessity. An oft-quoted problem in the US intelligence process is decision makers lack the time (even if they had the capacity) to identify their intelligence needs, leaving the Intelligence Community to guess many requirements. It is not unreasonable to think this problem exists elsewhere and, to the extent decision makers are unable to articulate their information needs, intelligence officers need to be able to observe decision makers’ behavior to identify where intelligence can best serve the national interest.  

Intelligence organizations also must be able to go outside normal policy processes to reach key decision makers to provide warning effectively. Policy organizations and processes usually are designed to handle specific problems or areas of activity (e.g. the U.S. Department of State for diplomacy and consular services), and rhythms of activity can harden these processes. Strategic warning is an inherently disruptive process to established procedures, and successful warning often hinges on the resolution of cognitive dissonance and its institutional counterpart.  

One of the reasons why counterterrorism may have received less attention in the 1990s in the United States despite strategic warning of Al Qaeda is the national security policymaking
process may not have developed an appropriate process and rhythm to deal with the competition and the institutional constraints. The CIA culture focusing on providing information rather than implementing policy, such as in covert action and other aspects of counterterrorism, may have militated against aggressive CIA counterterrorism operations under ambiguous authority. The debates played out since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks over CIA authority to conduct operations against Al Qaeda indicate the institutional constraints of the presidential finding process. Only once the threat promised unacceptable losses did the United States smooth out the kinks in the intelligence and policy process for global counterterrorism.

To what extent is counterintelligence integrated into the normal functioning of an intelligence service or intelligence system?

Richard Helms famously observed “No intelligence service can be more effective than its counterintelligence component for long.” Counterintelligence is fundamentally about the protecting the integrity of the intelligence process, including validation of the intelligence service’s operations and countering an adversary’s intelligence efforts through denial, control, and manipulation. If an intelligence service cannot maintain the integrity of its information, then it loses almost any claim to special insight and special access to senior decision makers.

The elements of counterintelligence effectiveness go somewhat beyond the scope of this essay; however, a few observations reasonably can be offered. First, what intelligence officers should be to decision makers, counterintelligence officers should be to the leadership of the intelligence service. These officers need to be politically effective within their own organizations with peer recognition for competence. Second, analytic and records management capability are required to validate an intelligence service’s ongoing operations and monitor a foreign

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48 The finger-pointing efforts in the testimony to the 9/11 Commission and various intelligence memoirs published since 2001 illustrate the confusion and uncertainty related to the strategic warning of Al Qaeda’s intentions to harm US interests at home and abroad. See, for example, Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), and George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).


intelligence service’s operations.\textsuperscript{51} This also suggests the ability to integrate different collection enterprises—now known as INTs—strengthens an intelligence service’s counterintelligence capability.

*To what extent are the political (or other) risks inherent to intelligence operations balanced with decision making objectives?*

Just as in military affairs, a mismatch between strategy and capabilities degrades the effectiveness of decision making and intelligence services. If the state pursues a wide-ranging global set of foreign policies, then a global information network is required. The information technology revolution has made this easier to develop, but an intelligence service using other information providers and liaison partners would have to expand its reach. Similarly, carefully calibrating an aggressive foreign policy puts pressure on an intelligence service to be aggressive and warns adversary counterintelligence services about intelligence requirements. Both situations make intelligence services vulnerable to manipulation and fabricators, testing their ability to validate and secure collection efforts.

The second area of concern is the political risk of intelligence operations, particularly in human intelligence operations. Although more attention has been paid to the potential blowback from covert action, intrusive intelligence operations can damage national strategic objectives if uncovered. For example, the East German HVA recruited the personal secretary of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, whose efforts, known as *Ostpolitick*, to open and strengthen German relations across the Iron Curtain made his political survival important to Berlin. When West German counterintelligence uncovered the espionage operation, the resulting scandal brought down the government and ushered in new leadership much less favorable to East Germany.\textsuperscript{52} A similar analogy can be drawn to Soviet espionage against the West in the 1930s. The sheer scale of Soviet espionage suggested infiltration for something other than information.\textsuperscript{53} And similar

\textsuperscript{51} Olson, “Ten Commandments of Counterintelligence”; William Johnson, *Thwarting Enemies at Home and Abroad: How to be a Counterintelligence Officer* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 131–134, 175–184. Vetting an operation or collection source is an analytic process, requiring all of the resources associated with good analysis—e.g. expertise, creativity, structured or controlled thinking to lower the role cognitive biases. For an excellent description of one process of validation, see Richards Heuer, “Nosenko: Five Paths to Judgment” (*Studies in Intelligence* 31, No. 3, Fall 1987), 71–101.

\textsuperscript{52} Markus Wolf with Anne McElvoy, *Man without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism’s Greatest Spymaster* (New York: Public Affairs, 1997), 166–172

\textsuperscript{53} Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, 184–185.
arguments are being put forward today about how China’s cyber-based signals intelligence operations may be creating negative international responses out of proportion to the intelligence gained.\textsuperscript{54} Without discussion about connections between operations and policy, decision makers can be surprised with embarrassing consequences when an operation goes wrong.

**Operational Level: Constructing a Collection Enterprise**

Operational effectiveness deals primarily with collection effectiveness and the ability to integrate capabilities (or create new ones) to meet intelligence requirements. In the simplest terms, operational effectiveness relates to a service’s ability to manufacture opportunities to find or create knowledge relevant to policymaking. This wording deliberately implies intelligence analysis is an operational capability and is not necessarily a phenomenon distinct from intelligence collection. While the process may be different, the objective is not.

The evaluation of intelligence collectors—particularly HUMINT services—frequently misleads rather than clarifies how a collection organization should be assessed. The most common error is analysts equating dissimilar cases. Critics of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service (formerly, Directorate of Operations) repeatedly have made this mistake, conflating counterespionage fiascoes, failed spy operations, and links to human rights issues as measures of clandestine collection effectiveness.\textsuperscript{55} The primary issue is collection and the integrity of the collection. While these issues may affect this integrity, they are superficial or irrelevant without connection to the collection and generation of intelligence information.

*To what extent does an intelligence service combine collection disciplines to cue other collection methods or to create new opportunities for access?*

This question almost reaches the strategic level, because of the potential value of integrating collection disciplines. A single collection discipline may be wholly inadequate for a given situation, and not simply because an adversary can more easily manipulate one source than many. Not every official can be recruited, nor every signal exploited. An effective intelligence


\textsuperscript{55} William Lahnemann “US Intelligence Prior to 9/11 and Obstacles to Reform” in Reforming Intelligence: Obstacles to Democratic Control and Effectiveness, eds., Thomas Bruneau and Steven Boraz (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 78-80; John Diamond, *The CIA and the Culture of Failure: US Intelligence from the End of the Cold War to the Invasion of Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 199–247; Russell, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence*, 95–118.
service regularly combines collection methods to circumvent an adversary’s security procedures and access the information required by decision makers.\textsuperscript{56} The combinations are many and varied, depending only on the target and information sought. For example, an agent may implant a measurement and signatures intelligence (MASINT) collection device, which transmits a signal for continuing data exfiltration.

The idea of a doctrine for combined intelligence operations modeled on combined military operations recently captured elements of this theme, but complicated the point.\textsuperscript{57} The concept of combined military operations guides the employment of one’s own military forces against the adversary. In intelligence, too much depends on the adversary, their vulnerabilities to collection, and the information desired for doctrinal systematization. As James Wirtz and Jon Rosenwasser point out, the information does not always exist to be collected.\textsuperscript{58} Although war belongs to the realm of chance, battlefield outcomes are predictable when compared to the possibility of an intelligence officer recruiting any given senior policy official or an engineer managing an encrypted communications line. Yet the collection disciplines can integrate piecemeal and pragmatically to work around an intelligence target’s defenses, and many great collection successes depend upon an intelligence service being open to opportunities and doing just that.\textsuperscript{59}

\textit{To what extent does an intelligence service draw upon domestic and foreign (liaison) intelligence partners to meet intelligence shortfalls?}

When an intelligence service cannot generate opportunities on its own, it must turn to partner organizations, both domestically and abroad. As a Canadian defense official noted “No agency can do and know everything.”\textsuperscript{60} Intelligence sharing also facilitates collective action by

\textsuperscript{56} Robert Clark, \textit{Intelligence Analysis: A Target-Centric Approach}, see, especially, 8–23, for a description of an approach to intelligence built around the interactions between a target and policymakers.

\textsuperscript{57} James Wirtz and Jon Rosenwasser, “From Combined Arms to Combined Intelligence: Philosophy, Doctrine, and Operations,” \textit{Intelligence and National Security} 25, no. 6 (December 2010), 725–743.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 730–731. For other examples, see Benjamin Fischer, \textit{A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare} (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997).

\textsuperscript{59} For example, the breaking of German encryption ahead of World War II—the product of which would become ULTRA—involved human intelligence, signals intelligence, and intelligence liaison along with the scientific and engineering capability to build decoding machines. See, Jean Stengers, “Enigma, the French, the Poles, and the British, 1931–1940,” in \textit{The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century}, eds., Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 126–137.

\textsuperscript{60} Stéfane Lefebvre, “The Difficulties and Dilemmas of International Intelligence Cooperation” (\textit{International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence} 16, No. 4), 534
helping threat perceptions to converge or justifying decision makers’ actions, giving it an additional political or policy angle that makes intelligence services valuable to decision makers.\textsuperscript{61} Managing the intelligence and political aspects of the intelligence partnerships is a difficult but vital component of an intelligence service, especially for services with too few resources to match the broad coverage demanded by their decision makers.\textsuperscript{62}

The largest dilemma of working in partnership with other services is the creation of a new intelligence—or perhaps, more appropriately, counterintelligence—challenge. To trust a partner service’s information requires vetting that organization, developing a mechanism for feedback, and providing a tangible benefit, whether economic, intelligence, military, and/or political. This can either be a counterintelligence study and operation against that service or achieved through cultivating the partner’s dependency.\textsuperscript{63} Such vetting also allows an intelligence service and its decision makers to make a better strategic judgment about whether the potential gain from working with the liaison partner is worth the political risk of being linked to the partner’s and the partner country’s actions.\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{How quickly can an intelligence service validate and vet information in its possession?}

Research into how human minds work demonstrates the potentially devastating effects of false information on our thinking and the human willingness to hang onto an assessment long after new information proves it false—also known as the “anchoring bias.” The ability to falsify bad or misleading intelligence reports is the basic epistemological policing required for large information processing enterprises. In the intelligence world, the potential for deliberate deception—both adversaries and confidence men or, in intelligence jargon, fabricators—makes information validation more difficult and more necessary than the simple signals-and-noise

\textsuperscript{61} One of the classic examples of intelligence sharing to accomplish both goals took place in the run-up to the Organization of Atlantic States and United Nations meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The United States dispatched senior intelligence personnel armed with the photographs and other intelligence to foreign capitals to prepare foreign governments for US actions.
\textsuperscript{62} Herman, \textit{Intelligence Power in Peace and War}, 212–217
\textsuperscript{64} Walsh, \textit{The International Politics of Intelligence Sharing}, 140–142; Lefebvre, “The Difficulties and Dilemmas of International Intelligence Cooperation,” 534–535.
concept suggests. Many potential surprises and threats never fully materialize. Additionally, most major intelligence requirements are knowable without special access to information—e.g. the state of Iran’s nuclear program, will China change its policy on North Korea, where is Ayman al-Zawahiri, etc.—giving thoughtful fabricators continuing opportunities to mislead and exploit the intelligence process for personal gain.

The importance of evaluating the providence of intelligence information however goes well beyond truthfulness of reporting and strikes to the heart of decision makers’ confidence in an intelligence service. As noted above in the political and strategic effectiveness sections, intelligence officers need to be in the room when decisions get made and they need to be believed. An intelligence service that does not engender confidence in its information or distributes potentially misleading information damages its credibility just as readily as “crying wolf” because of oversensitivity to potential threats.

To what extent is analysis used to create knowledge?

Intelligence scholarship probably has overestimated how important high-level, all-source analysis is central to the performance and success of intelligence. Analysis receives the most attention in public discussions, which often note something along the lines of “the contribution of analysis to policy is the raison d’être of intelligence” or “analysis has always been and will always remain the core skill in and the big challenge of intelligence.” However, if we think about intelligence as actionable or practical knowledge, giving an advantage in a competition, then whether intelligence is analytically- or collection-derived is largely irrelevant.

The regular summarizing of new intelligence reports and breaking events—so-called “current intelligence”—does not necessarily, or even routinely, create knowledge. Current intelligence may be a valuable part of information processing to alert decision makers to new information or connect their questions with existing information, but it falls short of generating

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66 The specific citations are from, respectively, Holt, *Secret Intelligence and Public Policy*, 80, and Thomas Bruneau and Steven Boraz, “Intelligence Reform: Balancing Democracy and Effectiveness,” in *Reforming Intelligence*, 8.
67 Founder of the Chinese missile and space program, Qian Xuesen, defined intelligence as “activating [catalytic] knowledge” (jihuo zhisheng).
anything new and being anything beyond collection processing. When current intelligence dominates analytic production and the time of analysts, it allows information generation through the course of human events to drive the analytic process instead of the needs of decision makers and the information underpinning policy, that is, strategic information. The reportedly current intelligence focus of much of the US Intelligence Community’s analytic resources suggests neglect. This also explains the neglect of analytic tools and the “new” analytic tradecraft as Johnston chronicled in his ethnographic study.70

Most of what is considered formalized “analytic tradecraft” relates to knowledge creation based upon recognized epistemological standards. For example, Analysis of Competing Hypotheses is nothing but a shorthand application of Karl Popper’s discussion of method in Conjecture and Refutation. Some intelligence questions are incredibly difficult to find knowledgeable sources or appropriate communications nodes into which to tap, such as those relating elite decision making in closed societies. Ignoring the scientific and systematic creation of knowledge means important sources of information, of new knowledge, on difficult topics is being ignored. Even if a social scientific basis for behavior cannot be found, systematic research and database building provides easier recall for current intelligence analysts to contextualize incoming data.

**Tactical-Capability Level:**

Intelligence services build their reputation and success off of their capabilities. Capability creates opportunity; well-balanced process allows execution. At the operational level above, any collection enterprise will involve multiple capabilities in terms of executing the operation and exploiting the results, depending on the successful execution of each.

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68 A reasonable argument could be made that current intelligence strengthens the transmission of intelligence information to decision makers, but that is an issue at the strategic level of effectiveness. The operational level is primarily concerned with acquiring previously unknown or unavailable information. It is also important to note the general production of current intelligence may not be conducive to transmission, see, Jack Davis, “A Policymaker’s Perspective on Intelligence Analysis,” (Studies in Intelligence, 1995) and Sherman Kent, “Estimates and Influence” (Studies in Intelligence 13, No. 3, Summer 1968), 11–21.

69 As Heidenrich reminds us, strategic intelligence has to do with supporting national strategy—length and time horizon, two factors commonly confused with “strategic analysis,” have nothing to do with it.

70 In Rob Johnston’s ethnographic study of US intelligence analysis, he found many analysts saw themselves more as journalists rather than analysts who created something, which suggests, even if current intelligence product aided in transmission, a low degree of effectiveness in the US Intelligence Community at generating intelligence knowledge through analysis. See, Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community: An Ethnographic Study. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005, 9–29.
This level of analysis probably can only be thoughtfully and comprehensively considered in a classified environment, because of the extent to which many capabilities remain secret and should remain so. There is at least one vital question for understanding effectiveness at the capability level that can be addressed openly and should be consider by those responsible for evaluating the performance of intelligence organizations.

*How well does an intelligence service integrate people, process, and technology?*

The biggest question for any capability is the proper balance of people, standard operating procedures, and technology. Making choices about how to balance these three components requires tradeoffs. Throwing people at a problem may appear to be an easy solution; however, in addition to the potential human resources problems, training time and costs need to be considered. Tailored technology solutions can speed the collection and processing of intelligence, but the investment is not certain and the payoff may be longer than anticipated. An effective intelligence service thinks critically about these choices—and integrating these capabilities into the operational level of effectiveness—and makes them within the means of the intelligence service’s political effectiveness to secure the resources it needs.

The problem of processing the hours and hours of foreign-language collection from listening devices—e.g. telephone taps and listening devices—illustrates the importance of the interaction between these three factors. Without capacity to search voice data for keywords, then linguists most comb all data and manually triage the conversations—a very personnel-intensive process. Without a clear process for prioritizing what information to translate and disseminate, the linguists may simply proceed chronologically or some other organizing scheme without respect to the larger decision making environment. Standards for triage and the level of detail in a report would help an intelligence service exploit the data collection in a timely fashion, hopefully reaching decision makers before events or decision-making processes overtake the value of the information.

**Concluding Thoughts on Effectiveness**

When commission after commission, policymaker after policymaker, and intelligence officer after intelligence officer complain about the current the US intelligence system, the biggest question is how to evaluate their claims. The 9/11 Commission, one of the largest and
most visible efforts to review the work of the Intelligence Community, received criticism for the shallow nature of its analysis about the system and how to fix it.\textsuperscript{71} Too many of the criticisms relate to single incidents of intelligence failure rather than performance over time—and often without reference to the decision-makers the U.S. Intelligence Community supports. Since policymaker demand is one of the few easy ways for coping agencies to measure “performance,” the structure of policymaking may be a more important reason than adaption failure as a factor explaining why the U.S. Intelligence Community rejected more than 90 percent of the recommendations made by external commissions between the end of the Cold War and September 11, 2001.\textsuperscript{72}

The notion of efficiency imbedded in effectiveness suggests, perhaps falsely, some way to measure the costs and benefits of intelligence. Michael Herman, however, pointed out that, apart from intelligence support to economic negotiations, accounting for the value of intelligence is almost impossible.\textsuperscript{73} This problem probably accounts for the dearth of scholarly and practical literature on intelligence effectiveness. Importing metrics from competitive intelligence activity business probably would do little to remedy the problem apart from adding sophistication to what can already be measured. As this essay shows, measuring the effectiveness of intelligence organizations will remain not a question of dollars but of sense: how well does an intelligence service create and transmit necessary knowledge to decision makers?

Normative thinking about intelligence has been vital to identifying the important aspects of the intelligence process; yet, much historical and organizational analysis remains for exploring intelligence effectiveness. The anecdotal basis for the thoughts here is sufficient to raise the questions, but not necessarily identify the answers and more definitively link them to the broader framework of the relationship between decision makers and intelligence services. More authoritative analysis is needed, not simply in terms of effectiveness. As noted above, the


\textsuperscript{72} Amy Zegart, \textit{Spying Blind}, 5. The wholesale rejection of outside recommendations more likely reflects the utility of the recommendations to the work of the Intelligence Community, at least that community perceives its work and responsibilities as well as its links to decision makers.

\textsuperscript{73} Herman, \textit{Intelligence Power in Peace and War}, 301–303.
relationship between decision-making needs (known and unknown), competitions, and intelligence services is relatively fluid and dynamic, and more research is needed to pattern the ebb and flow. When even the historians complain about under-theorization, the situation must be dire indeed.74

This essay started with the unstated assumption that intelligence effectiveness could be evaluated in terms of an intelligence service; however, it may be more appropriate to analyze entire intelligence systems, as daunting as that task appears. The obvious alternative approach to analyze key decision makers and their use of intelligence resources—as Christopher Andrew did in his classic *For the President’s Eyes Only* and Alexander George did in *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*—only carry us further away from understanding intelligence services. To date, the most comprehensive and thoughtful study of military organizations remains the three-volume series *Military Effectiveness* edited by Allen Millett and Williamson Murray, comparing national military organizations from 1914 to 1945. Even there, however, the lines blurred between organizational and systemic effectiveness. Such a comparative analysis probably is the next important step for exploring this concept further and to discriminate between the relative importance of intelligence organizations and systems. More questions certainly need to be raised and tested to flush out this beginning to a framework for understanding intelligence effectiveness.

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