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Intelligence

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: In its broad understanding, the term ‘intelligence’ refers to all forms of intelligence, including foreign intelligence, domestic (counterintelligence), covert action, and other aspects of intelligence activities. In this context, due to the large number of definitions of this term, it is important to list several of the features that all definitions share. These can be narrowed down to four main groups: intelligence as information, as a process, as a mission, and as organisation.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM: The beginning of intelligence studies dates back to the 1950s, since when discussions on a comprehensive definition of the concept of intelligence have been ongoing, but no single definition has been accepted by the majority of researchers. The legal definitions included in legal acts of various states that appear in official government documents are usually rather general and do not provide a definitive explanation of the concept.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: Intelligence should be understood as information or knowledge which is helpful in making strategic decisions. Intelligence information is a product of intelligence operations and must be properly processed in a process called the intelligence cycle before it reaches its recipients. Another component of intelligence is non-information activities, called missions, which include counterintelligence missions and covert action. The final element of the definition of intelligence is its organisation, i.e., the functioning of the intelligence services and their place in the structure of the state.

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: In the search for a comprehensive definition of the term

'intelligence', scholars and practitioners have proposed a number of solutions, ranging from extremely broad to very narrow definitions; some have even suggested abandoning any attempts at formulating a definition and instead focusing on the practical aspects of intelligence activities. However, it seems that enumerating the features shared by most definitions is the most sensible solution and can best explain the essence of the concept under discussion.

Keywords: intelligence, definition of intelligence, foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, special services

Definition of the term

Narrow and broad approaches to the term 'intelligence'. In its broad understanding, the term 'intelligence' refers to all forms of intelligence, including foreign intelligence, domestic intelligence (counterintelligence), covert action, and other aspects of intelligence activities. Sometimes the term is used only in its narrow understanding to refer to foreign intelligence, without including its domestic counterpart, which is called counterintelligence, hence the term 'intelligence and counterintelligence services'. This is also the case in Poland, where, due to the existence of the statutory notion of special services, the term 'intelligence' is frequently used to refer only to the *Agencja Wywiadu* [Foreign Intelligence Agency] and the *Służby Wywiadu Wojskowego* [Military Intelligence Service], thereby excluding the *Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* [Internal Security Agency] and the *Służby Kontrwywiadu Wojskowego* [Military Counterintelligence Service], which are covered by the term 'counterintelligence'. In this article, the term intelligence is used in its broad understanding, which is also the prevalent approach in American and British intelligence studies, in which the word intelligence is defined equally broadly.

The meaning of the term 'intelligence' can be analysed on three levels. The first involves legal definitions adopted in states' legal acts. Undoubtedly, the strength of these definitions lies in their high status, which is a result of them being positioned in statutory solutions. However, they are very general definitions, which is a characteristic feature of legal acts. The second level covers definitions of this term provided in official documents (strategies, reports, concepts, etc.) prepared by various governmental institutions, including intelligence agencies. Although these definitions are broader, they usually focus on the issues most pertinent for the activities undertaken by a specific institution (which results in, e.g., too much focus on foreign intelligence or counterintelligence). The third level covers the definitions prepared by researchers working within intelligence studies who formulate many comprehensive – albeit varying – definitions of the concept of intelligence.

Key elements of the definition. There is no consensus within intelligence studies on one comprehensive and universally accepted definition. Peter Gill and Mark Phythian, in describing this problem,

used a vivid comparison: “[o]nce we attempt to define intelligence, it soon becomes apparent that, as a concept, it is as elusive as the daring fictional agents who have cemented it in the popular imagination” (Gill & Phythian, 2018, p. 1). Michael Warner observed that each researcher tries to come up with their own definition, which rarely refers or relates to the findings of other researchers. In his opinion, this is not a desirable outcome as a precise definition of intelligence could help to develop a coherent theory of intelligence and lead to a better understanding of it (Warner, 2002, p. 1).

With these objections in mind, it must be acknowledged that all definitions share certain features, which can be organised into four main groups:

- intelligence as information (knowledge);
- intelligence as a process (the intelligence cycle);
- intelligence as a mission (counterintelligence and covert action);
- intelligence as organisation (the functioning of intelligence services and their place in the structure of the state) (Johnson, 2010, p. 6; Lowenthal, 2017, pp. 10–11).

This approach integrates many of the shared elements developed by intelligence studies scholars over the past six decades. Each of these aspects (information, process, mission, organisation) necessitates a separate discussion, but let us start with the history of intelligence.

Historical analysis of the term

The beginnings of intelligence studies date back to the 1950s, when the first discussions on the definition of the term ‘intelligence’ began. The American and the British schools have developed over time as the two variants of these studies. Academics and practitioners from these two countries approach the definition of intelligence from different points of view and emphasise different aspects. In general, representatives of the American school prefer elaborate definitions and focus mainly on the process of information gathering and analysis, and on intelligence as a product of this process. Researchers from the UK formulate narrow definitions and emphasise the special role of secret information, which is impossible to obtain in the same way as other forms of intelligence.

The pioneer of American intelligence analysis, Sherman Kent, in his book *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1965), characterised intelligence as knowledge, organisation, and activity. In his opinion, a state must possess a particular type of intelligence (which he called high-level foreign positive intelligence) in order to ensure that its interests are not jeopardised as a result of the ignorance of politicians and the military, and that operations undertaken in this area are not doomed to failure. Intelligence is also a form of organisational structure that gathers, processes, and presents specific information and delivers it to those who need it most in exactly the form they demand. Kent also treats intelligence as a specific range of activities performed by the intelligence structures of the state that are intended to support the states' plans to the greatest extent possible (Kent, 1965, p. XXIII).

The British scholar Michael Herman agreed with Kent's definition but also emphasised that of the three parts of this definition (i.e., knowledge, organisation, and activity), the organisational aspect is the most important, since intelligence is specialised government intelligence services (called government intelligence), including everything they do and the knowledge they produce (Herman, 1998, p. 1). He observed that intelligence activities in government structures are usually performed by specific state structures, institutions, or (sometimes) intelligence complexes in order to collect data and information and prepare materials on a given topic.

Of recent definitions of intelligence, one that is especially popular and often quoted is that of Mark Lowenthal, an experienced intelligence analyst and author of *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*. According to him, intelligence should be considered as:

- the process by which specific types of information important to national security are requested, collected, analysed, and provided to policy makers;
- the products of that process;
- the safeguarding of these processes and this information by counterintelligence activities;
- the carrying out of operations as requested by lawful authorities (Lowenthal, 2017, pp. 10–11).

However, not all scholars of intelligence studies agree with this definition. For example, Michael Warner found Lowenthal's definition to be

generally quite accurate but also too broad. In his opinion, the phrase ‘information important to national security’ can accommodate too much diverse military or diplomatic information that is not intelligence information (e.g., weather conditions in Asia or the age of a politburo member). He also argued that Lowenthal’s definition is, to an extent, tautological in its claim that intelligence is what counterintelligence safeguards. Warner observed that a comprehensive definition must include several main elements, thanks to which it can be unambiguously stated that intelligence:

- is linked to the production and dissemination of information;
- is performed by officers of the state for state purposes (officers receive directions from the state’s civilian and military leaders);
- is focused on foreigners – usually other states, but also foreign subjects, corporations, or and groups;
- is involved in influencing foreign entities by means that are unattributable to the acting government (if the activities of the government are open and declared, they are the province of diplomacy, if they utilise uniformed members of the armed forces, they belong to the military);
- dependent upon confidential sources and methods for full effectiveness.

Warner thus provided his own definition of intelligence as “secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities” (Warner, 2002, p. 10).

Representatives of the British school of intelligence studies, Peter Gill and Mark Phythian, were highly sceptical about Warner’s definition. In their opinion, it is frustratingly incomplete and very American in nature as it focuses mainly on foreign actors and thus reflects the political debates held in the United States in 1947 during the creation of the CIA. For these researchers, a proper definition should take into account the fact that intelligence, among other things: is more than merely information collection, covers a range of linked activities; is security-based; aims to provide advance warning; it involves covert actions; and secrecy is essential to it. Therefore, combining these elements, Gill and Phythian defined intelligence as mainly secret activities – targeting, collection, analysis, dissemination and action – intended to enhance security and/or maintain power relative to competitors by forewarning of threats and opportunities. They also observed that the need for counterintelligence arises out of this logic (Gill & Phythian, 2018, p. 4).

When analysing definitions of intelligence, it is also worth mentioning the achievements of the Polish doctrine of security studies. However, it should be remembered that in Poland the English term 'intelligence' refers to 'special services', while the term 'wywiad' is usually used to denote foreign intelligence. This is clearly seen, for example, in the definitions provided in *Słownik terminów z zakresu bezpieczeństwa narodowego* [*Glossary of National Security Terms*], where *wywiad* [*intelligence*] is defined as activities which aim to collect – legally and illegally – and compile information on foreign states, particularly regarding their economic condition and security measures. The authors of the *Dictionary* thus defined this term only in the context of foreign intelligence. They defined special services as “a general term for civilian and military services which organise and conduct intelligence and counterintelligence activities” (Kaczmarek, Łepkowski & Zdrodowski, 2008, pp. 123–124, 172). This definition is broader and is more in line with the notion of intelligence, even though the focus is primarily on organisational issues.

The definition proposed by Sławomir Zalewski is far more comprehensive and, although it also concerns the term 'special services', it fits well with the British understanding of intelligence. In his opinion, special services are “structures, usually organised by the state, aimed at the secret acquisition of information relevant to the security of the organiser of this activity (the state) or to counteracting its acquisition by equivalent foreign structures” (Zalewski, 2005, p. 34). This researcher referred to the concept of special services as both foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, but with the reservation that their place in the state security system should nowadays be considered in relation to other services and organs performing tasks in this system (Zalewski, 2005, p. 34).

In his monograph *Sztuka wywiadu w państwie współczesnym* [*The Art of Intelligence in the Modern State*], Mirosław Minkina aligns his concept of intelligence with the British understanding and does not use the term 'special services'. In his opinion, intelligence can be treated as an art form as it is a creative process with special skills in which success is achieved thanks to intuition and instinct, combined with knowledge and experience based on intuition. The author also listed seven characteristic features of intelligence as an institution of the state:

- despite its secret nature, intelligence is sometimes subject to political influence, which makes it possible to subject it to public evaluation;

- the object of intelligence is information about threats to the state;
- the purpose of intelligence is to gain an information advantage, to support decision-making processes, and sometimes to influence events in other states;
- the essence of intelligence methodology is secrecy;
- intelligence can undertake (when required) covert action not linked to collecting information in other states;
- the specific nature of intelligence justifies the identification of threats to the existence of the state (military) and non-state actors;
- intelligence operates under conditions of instability in the international environment, which reinforces the need for cooperation between intelligence services in the transnational dimension (Minkina, 2014, pp. 16–17).

The large number of definitions is not just characteristic of the literature on the subject; it is also evident when analysing the basic legislative acts in different countries (legal definitions), official government documents, as well as glossaries of terms or other publications issued by intelligence services and institutions linked to state security. A good example is the United States, whose legislation and various official documents employ a range of definitions of intelligence which emphasise its different aspects. There are two main reasons for this. First, in the American system, the intelligence services that make up the Intelligence Community have different missions and tasks, i.e., they define their work in different ways. The Central Intelligence Agency focuses, among other things, on international issues, whereas the Federal Bureau of Investigation mainly focuses on national security issues, therefore both interpret the concept of intelligence differently. In this context, R.A. Random (an author who writes under a pseudonym in the “Studies in Intelligence” journal, which was classified as confidential in 1958) made the interesting observation that when he asked some of his colleagues from the intelligence services what they understood by the term ‘intelligence’, they all gave him different definitions which tended to be so detailed that they covered little more than their own professional specialisation. He also observed that they often acknowledged that there were other service officers who perform similar activities but that what those others do is not intelligence activity in the strictest sense. The legal definitions used in legal acts are very

narrow (which is their characteristic feature) and do not fully explain the essence of intelligence. This also applies (to a lesser extent) to official definitions (e.g., glossaries of terms) issued by intelligence entities and other government institutions.

Discussion of the term

Intelligence as information (knowledge). The basic element present in most definitions is the perception of intelligence as information (also understood as knowledge). This is clearly emphasised in a 1999 Central Intelligence Agency document, which focuses only on this aspect and defines intelligence as knowledge and foreknowledge of the world around us, which is the prelude to decision and action by US policymakers (CIA, 1999, p. VII).

Thus, one of the main purposes of intelligence is to provide policymakers with information that can help them make strategic decisions. This information can, depending on the needs, be provided in the form of briefings, memoranda, or more formal reports (the size and detail of which depends on the requirements of the recipient). Each time, however, their purpose is to provide knowledge with a sufficient degree of specificity to provide policymakers with an ability to take action and make the right decisions (Johnson, 2010, pp. 21–22).

A number of intelligence studies scholars point out that while all intelligence is information, not all information is intelligence. Mark Lowenthal, for example, observed that although to many people intelligence seems little different from information (except that it is secret), it is very important to distinguish between the two concepts. Information is anything that can be known, regardless of how it is discovered. Intelligence refers to information that meets the specific (explicitly stated or understood) needs of policymakers and has been collected, processed, and narrowed to properly meet those needs. Intelligence is thus a subset of the broader category of information (Lowenthal, 2017, p. 2).

Intelligence as a process (the intelligence cycle). Before intelligence information (which is a product of the work of intelligence) reaches its recipients, it must be processed appropriately, which is part of the intelligence cycle.

In their day-to-day work, intelligence actors acquire vast amounts of information from a wide variety of sources. Over the years of this practice, a process made up of the interconnected and recurring activities of intelligence agencies – called the intelligence cycle – has taken shape. The most popular definition of the intelligence cycle indicates that it is the process of transforming raw data into a finished intelligence product that is disseminated to be used by key policymakers, military commanders, and consumers in decision-making processes (ODNI, 2011, p. 10)

As highlighted by Artur Gruszczak, as a sequential operation model the intelligence cycle allows intelligence data to be systematically, comprehensively, and logically gathered and processed. This cycle reinforces certain attitudes and behaviours of intelligence officers, which has a direct impact on the quality and quantity of intelligence products. It also introduces a certain order to the methods and techniques used by them (Gruszczak, 2016, p. 44)

Several versions of the intelligence cycle can be found in the intelligence studies literature and among practitioners that differ primarily in terms of the number of steps involved in the process. One of the most popular is the concept presented in a 2011 document issued by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which consists of six consecutive steps:

- planning and direction;
- collection of raw data from various intelligence sources;
- processing and exploitation of information;
- analysis and production of the intelligence product;
- dissemination of the finished intelligence product to the consumer;
- evaluation of the entire process (ODNI, 2011, p. 10).

It should be emphasised that collection intelligence plays a key role in the concept of the intelligence cycle. A traditional classification of intelligence sources includes the following:

- human intelligence (HUMINT) sources;
- geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) sources;
- signals intelligence (SIGINT);
- measurement and signature intelligence (MASINT);
- open-source intelligence (OSINT).

Intelligence as a mission (counterintelligence and covert action). When considering intelligence as a mission, the most common division is into counterintelligence missions and covert actions.

According to the *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions*, counter-intelligence is “activities which are concerned with identifying and counteracting the threat to security posed by hostile intelligence services or organizations or by individuals engaged in espionage, sabotage, subversion or terrorism” (NATO Standards Agency, 2014, p. 133). This definition identifies at least four main types of counterintelligence activities: counter-espionage, counter-sabotage, counter-subversion, and counter-terrorism.

Mirosław Minkina emphasised that the aim of counterintelligence is

to detect the activities of foreign intelligence services, to prevent them from operating, and to destroy or neutralise the results of foreign intelligence work. This aim is achieved by preventing the infiltration of the state by agents located within it, as well as by conducting an operational game of manipulation and by controlling intelligence operations directed against one’s state (Minkina, 2014, p. 367).

Intelligence studies literature distinguishes at least three types of counterintelligence activity:

- collection of information – obtaining information about the capabilities of foreign intelligence services to penetrate state secrets;
- defensive activities – thwarting the efforts of hostile intelligence services to penetrate state secrets;
- offensive activities – once the operations of hostile services have been identified, an attempt is made to manipulate these attacks, including by recruiting the opponent’s agents and turning them into double agents or by giving them false information to report (Lowenthal, 2017, p. 222).

The second element of the intelligence mission is covert action. This is the most controversial element due to, among other things, its forms (e.g., targeted assassinations, coups, paramilitary operations, sabotage, or black propaganda). Covert action interferes in the internal affairs of foreign states, while the role played by intelligence (i.e., the organiser of these operations) is hidden. This is why critics of covert action often refer to it as ‘dirty tricks’. However, they have their own official terminology in different countries, including *tajne operacje* (Poland), covert action (US), special political action or disruptive action (UK), and *aktivnye mieroprijatiya* (Russia).

In the United States, covert action was defined in legal terms in the National Security Act of 1947. Under Section 503e, covert action means “an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly”. At the same time, under this definition covert action does not include activities the primary purpose of which is to acquire intelligence, traditional diplomatic or military activities, nor traditional law enforcement activities. Section 503f of the Act stipulates that “no covert action may be conducted which is intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies, or media”.

Such a precise statutory definition of covert action is rare. In most countries, legislation merely indicates which intelligence actors are authorised to conduct covert operations or, more frequently, includes a more general statement about ‘other activities’ carried out as directed by the relevant authorities.

The variety of covert operations is very broad. Jeffrey T. Richelson has described several distinct types of covert action, which include:

- black and grey propaganda;
- paramilitary or political actions designed to overthrow, undermine, or support a particular regime;
- paramilitary or political actions designed to counteract a state’s attempts to procure or develop advanced weaponry;
- support (through aid, arms, or training) of individuals or organisations (government components, opposition forces and political parties, and labour unions);
- economic operations;
- deception;
- targeted killings (Richelson, 2018, p. 518).

Covert action is used as an important tool in implementing strategic state policies. Its advantage lies in the fact that covert operations are more influential than traditional diplomacy, while being less drastic than the conventional use of military force. It should be noted, however, that while covert action is regulated by legislation at the national level, it is contrary to international law.

Intelligence as organisation. The final element of the definition of intelligence is its organisation, i.e., the structures in which

it operates in a given state. Each state has its own specificities of intelligence organisation, depending on different factors. These include:

- the organisational forms in which intelligence operates (e.g., independent agencies, departments within ministries, or directorates of general staff);
- legal aspects of intelligence operations;
- tasks and competences of particular intelligence services;
- the place of intelligence services in the structure of state bodies;
- system of coordination of intelligence operations and sharing of intelligence information (e.g., at governmental or intelligence community levels);
- the system of supervision and control (in democratic states by the executive, legislative and judicial branches; in non-democratic states by the ruling party or ruling elite) (Kamiński, 2021, p. 102).

The organisation of intelligence is also associated with its division into categories, the most basic and common of which is the division into foreign intelligence and domestic intelligence. This model operates in many countries, where different agencies are responsible for these two types, e.g., in the UK it is the Security Service (MI5) for domestic intelligence and the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) for foreign intelligence.

The second traditional typology of intelligence distinguishes between civilian and military intelligence. The separation of civilian intelligence services from military structures is now characteristic of most countries in the world, although it is a relatively recent phenomenon: the formation of the first civilian intelligence services did not begin until the early 20th century during the process of the institutionalisation of intelligence and its integration into state structures. Prior to this, such activities were mainly carried out by military organisations.

According to another criterion, intelligence is divided into strategic intelligence, operational intelligence, and tactical intelligence. There is also criminal intelligence, which is also known as law enforcement intelligence. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the changes to the US security system that followed, homeland security intelligence – also known as all-hazards intelligence – was established, which was a more capacious concept than domestic intelligence.

These categories of intelligence are not a closed catalogue. Other typologies can also be found in the literature, e.g., the division of foreign

intelligence into geographical categories (countries or regions) or the thematic division according to intelligence interests, including political intelligence and economic intelligence.

Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

The aforementioned definitions of intelligence formulated by the representatives of both the American and British schools of intelligence studies, as well as the Polish security sciences, reveal that the discussion on the definition of the concept in question is very lively and is multi-dimensional, which is why scholars are looking for different solutions.

One example is the approach of David Kahn, who adopted an extremely broad perspective in his publication *An historical theory of intelligence*. He emphasised that because none of the definitions he knew were appropriate, he decided that for the purposes of his theory he would define intelligence in the broadest possible sense, i.e., as information. In his opinion, this is analogous to the term 'news'; although it is almost impossible to define, every journalist knows exactly what it is (Kahn, 2009, p. 4).

Stephen Marrin questioned the sense behind seeking consensus on definitional issues at all. In his opinion, if there is no unanimity regarding fundamental concepts in other disciplines of science, then perhaps it is not necessary in intelligence studies either. He believes that instead of arguing about what words to use in a definition, it would be more effective to focus on the different aims of intelligence and to develop different schools of thought around them, which would lead to constructive debate between them (Marrin, 2016, p. 5).

Yet another solution was proposed by Mark Stout and Michael Warner, according to whom there is no such thing as the essence of intelligence, understood as intelligence per se. Therefore, when considering the concept of intelligence, they focused on its functions: both its core functions and peripheral functions. After analysing various definitions, they concluded that the commonly accepted core functions of intelligence can include, among other aspects, the collection and analysis of intelligence information and its dissemination to policymakers as a finished

intelligence product, as well as counterintelligence and covert action. While the core functions are common functions, they are not universal and different states around the world may use them or not use them. In addition, Stout and Warner stressed that while the core functions of intelligence are enduring, they may be augmented in the future by further components, potentially emerging from, e.g., clandestine diplomacy and cyber operations, which are confrontations at the intersection of peace and war, and shadow wars. Moreover, the core functions do not exhaust the variety of activities in which the intelligence services are actually involved. To prove this, these researchers presented numerous often very specific and unique (in terms of time and place) historical examples of peripheral intelligence functions, including conducting diplomatic operations, maintaining prisons, protecting borders, or designing the atomic bomb. According to these two researchers, the relationship between core and peripheral functions provides a better understanding of what intelligence is and what it can be. This led them to conclude that, in the state, ‘intelligence is what intelligence does’, which in turn is shaped by the decisions of state leaders (‘intelligence is what the boss says it is’), as well as by relationships between agencies within governmental structures and by strategic culture (Stout & Warner, 2018, pp. 517–523).

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