
Is Intelligence an Instrument of National Power?

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No one would dispute that intelligence is vitally important to preserving the security of the United States against state or non-state actors—foreign or domestic—just as no one would dispute that knowledge is power. Yet, there is wide disagreement over the role of intelligence in the realm of strategic thinking: Is it an instrument of national power or an enabler of national power? The dispute persists because as a national security community we have not defined what we mean by the term “instrument,” which has allowed national security stakeholders to advocate inconsistent roles for intelligence. We view the debate not as an abstract exercise but one that exposes the core difference between the hopes and the realities of intelligence. We propose that a political problem exists when we want intelligence to be an instrument because, in so doing, we not only misunderstand its nature; we generate a second-order effect of diminishing its ability to speak truth to power.

DIFFERING VIEWPOINTS

Those who argue that intelligence is an instrument of national power use the underlying metaphor of “knowledge is power” as it should be applied by a policymaker against a recipient—the threat—in the same way a hammer is used against a nail. Those who argue it is not an instrument, while they agree knowledge is powerful, focus on the role of intelligence role in supporting the source of the power—the policymaker—to help figure out when, where, or how much to use a hammer. The dilemma these perspectives create is a contradictory view of how intelligence is conceptualized: Intelligence as an instrument implies that policy shapes knowledge whereas intelligence as an enabler implies knowledge shapes policy. We argue for the latter case and it excludes the former. Not only does knowledge shape policy (and operations), but the truthfulness of knowledge offered by intelligence officers to policymakers must never be shaped by policy.

Doctrine, as we discuss below, defines intelligence as information that has been collected and analyzed into knowledge specifically for supporting policymaker decision-making. There are exceptions to this definition, the most prominent being covert action. Even though covert action—

such as paramilitary activity to capture, kill, or sabotage—is part of the mission of the Central Intelligence Agency, national security doctrine omits it from its meaning of the term “intelligence.” We suggest the reason why is that covert action is a military-like action taken after a political decision has been made to achieve policy objectives authorized by the President. As such, while it is clear to us that covert action uses force against a foreign threat, it is a completely different phenomenon from the creation of knowledge.

WHAT DOCTRINE SAYS

National security doctrine published over the past 20 years, when including the term “intelligence,” describes it as the collection and analysis of information—i.e., knowledge creation—regardless of whether intelligence is included in the doctrine as an instrument or not. Where doctrine has included intelligence as an instrument of national power, it has been almost exclusively counterterrorism-related. Its inclusion as an instrument emerged after the terrorist attacks of 2001, began to be downplayed beginning in 2010, and has been largely removed since 2011. In our review of national security doctrine over the past 20 years, we included those publications in which at least two instruments were mentioned. A number of military-related strategies, such as the 2012 *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defense*, refer to other instruments but do not specify what they are; hence, these documents were not considered in our analysis. More importantly, in no document was the word “instrument” actually defined other than the listing and definition of specific instruments such as military, diplomatic, and so on.

From 1994 through 2000, the White House published its annual *National Security Strategy*. In each of these seven documents, the word “instruments” was used to include the use of military, diplomatic, and economic actions as the means to implement strategy. Intelligence was mentioned in the 1998 and 1999 strategies insofar as it supported these means, and intelligence was described in these two strategies as the collection and analysis of information.

From 2002 through 2010, national security doctrine included intelligence and named it specifically as an instrument except in a number of cases discussed below where “tool” was used, but each document described intelligence as collection and analysis of information. Intelligence as an instrument first emerged in the White House’s 2002 *National Security Strategy* in the section discussing terrorism, and then in its 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* where it identified intelligence as a tool, using it synonymously as an instrument, along with other tools such as the military, diplomacy, and so on.

Congress passed into law the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, in which it described the National Counterterrorism Center as integrating intelligence as one of the instruments of national power. The Joint Chiefs of Staff published its *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* in 2006 and included intelligence as an instrument of national power. The White House published *The National Security Strategy of the United States* in 2006, listing intelligence along with the military and diplomacy instruments for fighting terrorism, and the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* also in 2006, including intelligence as an instrument of national power. However, then we start to see a shift in how intelligence is framed in the White House’s 2010 *National Security Strategy*, in which intelligence is included as an instrument of national power although not in the context of counterterrorism, but rather in the broader American engagement in the global arena. Similarly, a broader engagement for intelligence is used by the Department of Defense’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* published in 2010 that included intelligence as an instrument of national power.

The Department of Defense’s 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review did include intelligence as a tool of national power but only in the section pertaining to counterterrorism.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff published the *National Military Strategy* in 2011 but excluded the mention of intelligence as an instrument of national power, mentioning only the military, diplomatic, and economic instruments. The JCS also published in 2011 the *Joint Operations* (JP 3-0) and *Joint Operations Planning* (JP 5-0) doctrines, neither of which included intelligence as an instrument of national power, mentioning only the military, diplomatic, economic, and information. The White House published the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* in 2011, which also excluded intelligence as a tool of American power.

More recently, in 2013 the JCS published its *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (JP-1) and *Multinational Operations* (JP 3-16), which excluded intelligence as an instrument of national power, instead identifying the military, diplomatic, economic, and information as the instruments. The Department of Defense’s 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* did include intelligence as a tool of national power but only in the section pertaining to counterterrorism. Lastly, the White House published its 2015 *National Security Strategy*, which did not include intelligence as an instrument of national power; it did make the point that intelligence plays a support role to assist instruments.

WHAT ARE INSTRUMENTS?

To help move us in the direction of defining the term “instruments,” we next consider the characteristics of instruments as the term has been used in the doctrine discussed above. We use as a baseline the specific instruments mentioned during the pre-2001 and post-2010 time periods when instruments included the military, diplomatic, economic, and, for the most part, information. By doing so, we are able to compare these instruments in order to determine what commonalities exist. Then we evaluate intelligence with respect to these commonalities in order to determine the degree to which the concept of intelligence is consistent with the baseline use of instruments. Three characteristics are considered. First, how is the instrument wielded? Second, who wields the instrument against whom? Third, can the instrument be used independently from the others?

HOW IS THE INSTRUMENT WIELDED?

How are the instruments wielded? What are the mechanisms of effect? To explain these questions the following analogy is used. Two weapons of ancient combat are the spear and the shield. The spear is used primarily to project power toward an opponent in order to weaken or otherwise cause the opponent to react in a certain way. The shield, on the other hand, is primarily used in a more defensive way in order to protect one’s ability to continue to project power and act more freely in light of the opponent’s moves. This is not to say that a spear cannot be used defensively or a shield cannot be used offensively, or that they cannot be used together. It is only to say that each instrument is designed primarily in a particular way.

The Department of State—as lead agency—uses diplomacy through negotiations with global actors as a way of avoiding armed conflict. The United States maintains open relations with most other nations and actively seeks, through near-continuous negotiation, to convince others to act in a way that is consistent with its national objectives. In order to do this, the Department of State actively engages on the

international stage in a variety of ways ranging from multilateral talks on specific issues to daily one-on-one bilateral engagements with individual nations. In this sense, diplomacy is like a spear. It is used to project power actively in order to convince others to act in a certain way. However, diplomacy is also used to bolster the use of international institutions. Consequently, in this sense it is like a shield, developing capabilities that protect U.S. and allies' interests.

Informational power refers to the ability to communicate with and message to the world. Not only the Department of State but others in the U.S. government are involved with strategic communications, the messaging of what the United States wants the foreign public to understand. This is accomplished primarily through public diplomacy transmitting content through traditional media as well as online. The point of this effort is to affect the world's opinion of the United States. This is done actively in order to shift attitudes, hopefully leading to the modification of behaviors. The Department of State and others identify what opinion of the United States is needed from foreign publics to advance American interests. In this way, information power is actively wielded to project power like a spear as it is thrown toward the foreign actors in full view.

Military power, it seems logical to assume based by its violent capability, would also be actively projected. This is true in the obvious sense that if militaries are ostensibly used to kill and break things, and if a potential adversary does not want to risk having its people killed and its things broken, it will be inclined to behave in a certain way. This is, of course, not the only use for militaries. Military power of the United States usually causes potential adversaries to be hesitant of provoking the ire of the United States for fear of the response. In this way the military is a shield. It protects our freedom to act as we choose. It is arguable which is the primary function of the military, offense or defense. However, as either a spear or a shield, the military is used actively to project power or enable the ability to project power via other instruments.

Defining the economic instrument of power is something of a challenge. For our purposes the economic instrument is defined as actions taken—some as punishment, others as rewards—in the international arena to include sanctions, foreign aid, and establishment of trade policies. We impose or lift sanctions, offer or withhold aid, and modify our trade policies in order to influence the activities of every nation with which we have economic ties. It is clear that economic power is wielded like the spear. It is arguable whether trade policies could be used defensively to protect or prevent the likelihood of wars between trading partners. The economic instrument is viewed as primarily designed to project power actively though it too can be used defensively.

Intelligence is a critical enabler of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power projection.

If we consider intelligence as we just have as an instrument, we effectively are asking the question, "Does the United States use intelligence to directly—offensively or defensively—influence the activities of others in a way that is consistent with our desires?" There is no question that intelligence is used, but intelligence products are not themselves the tools directly causing the adversary to act in a certain way. Intelligence is a critical enabler of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power projection. Intelligence products themselves are not used directly; rather they inform the source of power serving to adjust, in a sense, how much, where, and when national power should be exercised. In this way, the character of intelligence is unlike the other instruments of national power.

Who Wields the Instrument Against Whom?

We next consider who determines the use of each instrument and who the intended target is. For example, who wields the diplomatic power? Historically, the President of the United States has set diplomatic policy implemented through the Secretary of State. Other government actors may get involved or try to get involved, but ultimately it is up to the President to set the direction of diplomacy, deal with the consequences, and communicate the results to the American people. This is not to say that the Congress, the public, the media, and others in government do not have a say, only that the President has the responsibility for developing and executing the policies. In that sense, the President wields diplomatic power.

Who wields informational power? Until the explosion of the Internet, the message that the United States projected to the world was based primarily upon official positions set forth by the White House. Those positions were influenced by a number of social and political factors and the media played a large role, but they were ultimately the responsibility of the President. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that today the world has significantly more information available to it, and its ability to access it has increased with the growth of Internet connectivity. Additional information includes everything from media reports of current events to social media. This makes the answer to the question "Who wields information power?" very difficult to answer with any real certainty. Ultimately, several groups exercise control of the message sent to the

world with regard to the United States: the President, the media, and the American public. On the other hand, no one has control over the Internet. It is often hard to figure out who is pulling the lever behind the face of information.

Who wields military power? The President of the United States is the commander and chief of the American military. In that role the President directly wields military power and is limited only by the Constitution, funding from Congress, and public opinion. Who wields economic power? As before, the economic instrument is defined to mean sanctions, foreign aid, and establishment of trade policies. This definition leads to the conclusion that the President and the Congress both wield economic power.

Who is the intended recipient of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments? While the desired outcome is going to be different for each instrument, the type of targeted recipient is the same. In other words, the instrument's outcome may seek to sway an adversary's public opinion, affect internal political discussions, affect commercial and business sectors, their relations with neighbors and trading partners, or any combination of these and a host of others. However, in each case Americans who wield instruments of national power ultimately do so in order to influence those who have the power and authority to cause the actions we desire. These instruments seek to affect an adversary's decision-maker.

Who wields intelligence? The President ultimately sets priorities. Congress provides funding. Still, neither of these really answers the question in the sense that it was answered for the other instruments of national power. Executive decision-makers use intelligence in determining which policies or strategies would be most appropriate for a given situation. Diplomats use intelligence to determine the best way to proceed in a given situation. Intelligence is used to determine how the message being sent to the world is being interpreted. Military leaders use intelligence to determine how much risk to take in a particular situation, and where to apply resources to optimize military power. Intelligence is used to determine the effect or likely effect of sanctions, foreign aid, and establishment of trade policies. Intelligence is different from diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power in that anyone and everyone involved in execution of government missions uses it to inform policymakers, who then make use of it by shaping how and when to use their spears, shaping their instruments of power. Who is directly affected by the use of intelligence? American (and/or allied) policymakers are.

Diplomatic, informational, military, and economic powers have various groups who wield them. What those sources of power have in common is they wield the instruments directly at foreign actors to achieve a desired outcome. That is to say, the sources of these instruments of power—the holders

of the spear—interface and interact directly with others in the world. The sources of intelligence, on the other hand, are the collectors and analyzers of information, and use the resultant knowledge in order to advise American holders of power who then can take action by themselves or with the other instruments. Those limited few who wield instruments of power have the authority to engage with global actors. Those who wield intelligence do so ubiquitously but do not have such authority; their responsibility is to provide knowledge to those who do have the authority. In these ways, the character of intelligence is unlike the other instruments of national power.

Can the Instrument Be Used Independently?

The motivation for this question is based on the assumption that the world is very complex and that bureaucratic divisions within government or any organization can never so neatly contain the framing of a problem, the selection of a solution, or its implementation. Since we live in an interdependent world where actions cause other actions, we assume an instrument cannot be employed without considering other instruments.

We propose that informational power requires two things to wield effectively: integrity and reach. Other instruments reinforce integrity if they demonstrate that "we do what we say." Communicating the message does not require the use of diplomatic, military, or economic power; it only requires that when we do use diplomatic, military, or economic power to communicate the message the source of power is consistent with the message that we communicate. Reach in this context is expanding the range of recipients by increasing the use of the sources of power; greater reach creates greater risk, especially when the integrity of the message by other sources of power cannot be managed effectively, which is typically the case. The longer the duration of use the more dependent information power becomes on the other instruments of power, and the more difficult integrity and reach are able to maintain.

Military, diplomatic, and economic powers follow the same interdependent logic. Each can be used only in the short term to a specific end, but not in isolation over the long term. The mere threat of the U.S. military engaging in an area may be enough for coercive diplomacy to get all but the staunchest or hard-to-isolate potential adversary to take notice and change its behavior. The actual use of military power eventually comes to an end and requires diplomatic and economic engagement. The use of economic tools has the same effect. Economic tools may be used within a diplomatic and informational strategy.

Intelligence is different. The knowledge created from the collection and analysis of information follows a logic of discovery, that of following the data and using analytic and

methodological techniques, employing various types of reasoning, confronting interpretation and bias issues, and ultimately delivering knowledge products to decision-makers regardless of how or who wields an instrument of power. While the world's behaviors and policymakers' concerns influence what topics intelligence pursues, the instruments of such sources of power do not affect knowledge production. Intelligence acts independently of the other instruments while the instruments of military, diplomacy, economics, and information are dependent upon each other. In this way, the character of intelligence is unlike the other instruments of national power.

CONCLUSION

Intelligence as defined by national security doctrine over the past 20 years has consistently been stated as the collection and analysis of information leading to the creation of knowledge. For a period of about 10 years, seemingly triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, primarily counterterrorism-related doctrine included intelligence as an instrument of national power in addition to the instruments of military, diplomatic, and economic power, informational power emerging in doctrine somewhat later. The effects of 9/11 likely motivated the sources of power to bring to bear enthusiastically everything this nation had to fight against the threat of terrorism, and in so doing broadened what we meant by an instrument of national power. Today, since at least 2011, doctrine for the most part has again narrowed its conceptualization of instruments to only those of military, diplomatic, economic, and informational. While likely no one event triggered this return, the WikiLeaks disclosure in 2010 of hundreds of thousands of classified documents—the largest in American history at the time—may have injected an incentive for reflecting on whether intelligence is an instrument of national power.

Is intelligence an instrument of national power? The answer is “no.” We used three lines of examination to explore the characteristics of an instrument, and compared intelligence to these characteristics. First, we argued that how an instrument is wielded is completely different among the military, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments than with intelligence: the former set projects power while the latter enables sources of power. Second, we contended that who wields power and against whom they wield it are also completely different between these two sets of activities: instruments and enablers. Military, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments are employed by a very limited few who have the authority to project power in order to affect actors on the global stage, while intelligence is used ubiquitously without any knowledge producer having such authority to affect global actors. Rather, the intelligence is created in order to inform American policymakers and to enable the decisions they make.

Third, we concluded that interdependency between instruments is completely different: the use of military, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments are highly dependent upon each other, whereas intelligence is employed relatively consistently regardless of the instruments of power it supports.

When we entertain intelligence—the collection and analysis of information leading to knowledge creation—as an instrument, we mistakenly give it a role as a power that can be projected onto the global arena. Covert action is an important instrument but it is not knowledge creation, i.e., intelligence. The risk in considering intelligence as an instrument is its absorption into the policymaking arena, an otherwise accepted and necessary relationship for an instrument of national power. However, the product of intelligence is truth, at least as we know it, and subjecting truth to power projection can result in very bad decision-making. A case in point is the manipulation of intelligence by policymakers between 2002 and 2003—specifically, by the Office of Special Plans within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy—to find evidence of a link between terrorism and Iraq suggesting that Iraq had a weapon of mass destruction program. The risk in structurally bringing intelligence into the realm of policy as an instrument is that we lose sight of the real strength of intelligence as the ability to speak truth without political influence by those in authority, that is, to speak truth to power.

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