

The Global Intelligence Network: Issues in International Intelligence Cooperation

by Marta Sparago

Introduction

Alliance building is a core foundation of international relations. In times of war and peace, nations have frequently cemented their relationships through diplomatic exchanges and governmental contacts. It is these relationships that can help build a long lasting front against security threats. But like any other relationship, these need to be tended to and looked after. In order for any relationship to be successful and mutually beneficial, a high level of trust and commitment must be achieved and maintained. In the world of intelligence, be it domestic or global, this relationship of cooperation and collaboration is vital to maintaining peace and security.

There are numerous examples of international regimes whose purpose is that of collective security. These regimes include but are not limited to military alliances, state building coalitions, and multi-state defense and security networks. International intelligence cooperation is another pillar of this collective security regime. The states that are members of these regimes will often share intelligence with one another's respective intelligence services and governments. These foreign intelligence services (FIS) offer their allies and counterpart's intelligence services information that might not be otherwise attained. The United States is home to the most advanced technology in the world. This however does not guarantee that all the intelligence that is gathered is accurate. The use of signals intelligence (SIGINT) is obviously an important part of intelligence gathering and analysis. But the U.S. can not be everywhere and often comes up against numerous obstacles where they do have a presence. Employing foreign intelligence officers for example will help bridge the intelligence gap that exists between the capabilities of U.S. intelligence and the intelligence that they actually get.

Intelligence cooperation has many obvious benefits, but there are also many risks involved. Cooperation means two or more parties working together. The cooperation is diminished if one party defects from the agreement. Another issue is priority. A security issue may dominate the concerns of one country while not the concerns of another. Because the latter is not focused on a particular threat, any pertinent information may go overlooked. Furthermore, there is that prospect that the cooperation could actually lead to a security crisis within the relationship. If one country shares its information with another country, the former is at risk of possibly sharing too much information and allowing a foreign government access to its most heavily guarded state secrets.

The purpose of this article is to examine the costs and benefits of international intelligence cooperation and how this cooperation fits into the theoretical framework of international relations. I will examine various aspects of the U.S. intelligence community and its relations with foreign intelligence services. The context of the article will be how intelligence cooperation is a vital part of maintaining state security and is now more important than ever in the age of transnational terrorism.

The U.S. Intelligence Community

As Michael Warner writes in his article, "Intelligence Transformation and Intelligence Liaison", "the primary mission of any intelligence structure is to defend its population and vital interests." In order to understand the importance of international intelligence cooperation it is important to understand the U.S. intelligence community.

The area in which the U.S. has a clear advantage is that of SIGINT, or signals intelligence. The U.S. owns and operates numerous satellites and other highly advanced technological methods of intelligence gathering. The U.S. is highly adept at monitoring land based and cellular communications, email monitoring, and other forms of “chatter” interception. Through the use of satellite imagery, analysts are able to pinpoint terrorist training camps for example. The area of HUMINT, or human intelligence, and other classical forms of espionage have however been harder to capitalize on over the years. Now that we are in the age of globalization, the technology must be able to keep up with the threats. These threats are often facilitated by the globalization of technology and information exchange. The internet, for example, has proven an extraordinarily effective recruitment and educational tool for terrorists.

International Intelligence Cooperation

Information sharing between international intelligence and security services is nothing new, nor is it a loosely organized and ill-governed association that operates free of oversight. Yes, some of these agreements fall under the unofficial and non-binding gentleman’s category, but they are durable and unyielding despite lacking certain basic formalities. These such agreements are formed without the official and proper terms that usually dictate interstate agreements. They are done through their own channels, using their own terms which are largely outside the realm of the tradition political structure:

“Intelligence exchange between these organizations is a world within a world, governed by its own diplomacy and characterized by elaborate agreements, understandings and treaties.” (Aldrich 737).¹

International intelligence cooperation can take many forms. Most often it is part of a bilateral agreement between states. This usually involves the exchange of liaison officers between the party’s intelligence services. Another way is through dual access to intelligence via technological means such as satellite sharing. Here is a brief account of various cooperative intelligence agreements that have been established over the years.

The United States has had a cooperative relationship with Israel for decades. This relationship grew during the Cold War when Russian immigrants to Israel provided the Mossad with valuable information about the Soviet Union, which was in turn given to the U.S. This relationship has also been vital to the U.S. in its efforts to monitor the situation in the Middle East.

Another type of intelligence cooperation is through multilateral agreements. The intelligence services of the U.K. and the U.S. have had a long and successful cooperative relationship. This is most evident in the formation of the 1948 UKUSA agreement which includes the U.S., the U.K., and also Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. This Anglo-American agreement employs shared satellite technology access between these nations. Also known as the “5 Eyes”, the various intelligence services of these states monitor SIGINT.

In addition to working with local law enforcement, there is also a high level of intelligence cooperation in the realm of finance. Numerous countries have worked with the U.S. to detect and freeze the assets of terror groups. The Egmont Group was started in 1995 as a way to confront money laundering. Later on the focus shifted to terrorist financing.² The Berne Group is a security and intelligence working group in Europe that the U.S. is not a member of. The Berne Group holds meetings throughout the year attended by the heads of the various security services in Europe. After 9-11 the Berne Group created the Counterterrorism Group (CTG) of which the U.S. is a part.³ Although the U.S. is not a party to the Berne Group, there should be

room for a degree of transatlantic cooperation. Even if the U.S. is only granted something along the lines of observer status, this is one organization that would be worth courting.

Intelligence Cooperation and the War on Terror

The biggest threats that the U.S. now faces are transnational. These threats include terrorism, drug trafficking, international crime, and the proliferation of WMD. These threats are transnational meaning they know no borders, perpetrators have no return address, and their reach is now global. These threats have a high mobility meaning it is easy to pick up and move around undetected. The threats that operate in weak and failed states are particularly worrisome because there is little domestic monitoring, let alone international. Porous borders, ineffectual governments, and minimal rule of law enable these threats to continue operating on such a grand scale. The lack of restraint these groups and threats have is precisely why international intelligence cooperation is more important than ever.

As has already been discussed, terrorism is a tactic. It is an entity in itself that can not be stopped or prevented by military force alone. Transnational threats require a transnational effort to fight them with even the slightest hope of success; “interests of the EU and the U.S. coalesced and found the expression in the formalization of intelligence agency cooperation in the days after 9/11” (Segell 82). The unilateral actions of the Bush administration are working to undermine this effort. It is true the U.S. has worked with foreign intelligence services in counterterrorism before, but there must be a bigger effort now to include and accommodate foreign intelligence into the domestic counterterrorism sphere. As we have seen in Egypt, Bali, Madrid, and London, terrorist attacks from Jihadist groups are not just isolated to the U.S. Intelligence cooperation is therefore mutually beneficial particularly for states that face similar security threats. It is important that we establish relationships with other intelligence communities and also with other cooperation organizations that the U.S. is not party to. Working with states previously considered hostile or rogue states should also be considered. The U.S. has already worked with Libya and Syria for example in the war of terror.

Ignoring and isolating regimes that abuse human rights or are a security threat themselves will not help the war on terror. These governments are an untapped resource that for the sake of preserving the American political conscience and setting the gold standard for morality, the U.S. government has not utilized. Engaging these governments would be a positive step in the international counterterrorism effort and it will establish relations that can be nurtured in the future. Working with nefarious governments, while tasteless and questionable to some, has more potential benefits than costs. Because many of these states have a terrorist presence, it would make sense to go right to the source. One example is the cooperation between the U.S. and Sudan despite that country’s appalling human rights record in Darfur:

“The Bush administration has forged a close intelligence partnership with the Islamic regime that once welcomed Osama bin Laden here, even though Sudan continues to come under harsh U.S. and international criticism for human rights violations. The Sudanese government, an unlikely ally in the U.S. fight against terror, remains on the most recent U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. At the same time, however, it has been providing access to terrorism suspects and sharing intelligence data with the United States”⁴

Issues of intelligence cooperation

In order for intelligence cooperation to work, there must be an established trust between the governments and intelligence services. Intelligence cooperation amongst the world’s intelligence and security services can be viewed as one of the many international regimes that

have become common on the international stage. Within the theoretical framework of international relations, we are able to explain the costs and benefits of intelligence cooperation.

The costs of intelligence cooperation can be explained by realism. States operate in an anarchic world. States will act selfishly and cooperation can diminish the states ability to gain leverage over other states. The unilateral and centrist actions of individual states threaten the functionality of these regimes because there are no real regulations to guarantee adherence. The first cost is the risk of defection. If a FIS or state government defects from an agreement, then the other intelligence services will be excluded from that states intelligence. Risk of defection is one of the reasons why realists are dismissive of regimes and institutions.

Second, in order for intelligence cooperation to be mutually beneficial to all involved, there must be equal levels of sharing. This relationship is a two-way street. If one intelligence service contributes to the safety and security of another, there must be reciprocity for the relationship to continue and be beneficial. Asymmetrical information sharing is counterproductive and will ultimately cost the withholder valuable information that may negatively affect future prospects for cooperation.

A third cost of intelligence cooperation is asymmetrical priorities. Terrorism is a top priority for the U.S. A significant part of its intelligence is directed towards the "war on terror". A FIS cooperating with the U.S. may not view terrorism as a high priority for the security of its own state. Because this state is not focused on terrorism, it will not be considered a security threat and will therefore not be an intelligence priority. This asymmetry allows valuable intelligence to slip through the cracks because a FIS might not be as alert or attuned to certain information as the U.S. would be.

This asymmetry can also be found in the legal systems and policies of foreign governments. The policy objectives and legalities that intelligence and security organizations function under vary by country:

"International intelligence cooperation presents a delicate quandary as between secrecy and transparency, sovereignty and cooperative security, especially in relation to collaboration among democracies" (Rudner 222).

There may be a divergence in the way that intelligence is gathered. Certain services will put more stock in raw data while others focus on the finished product. Many domestic laws also vary and what is legal in one country may not be legal in another. This can be detrimental to a relationship as is the case of the governments of the EU states refusal to extradite criminals and terror suspects to the U.S. who would possibly face the death penalty. This asymmetrical policy dilemma also means that intelligence services may need to work with a FIS in a state that commits human rights abuses and who would otherwise be shunned by the international community.

A fourth cost is the intelligence itself. The U.S. has its share of enemies, many of whom may be operating within the state of one of our allies or intelligence partners. There is of course always the risk that the intelligence that is relayed may be incorrect. However, this problem is magnified by the reliance on foreign intelligence because there is no guarantee this intelligence is being passed along for benevolent purposes. Furthermore, working with a FIS means opening up portions of your own domestic capabilities to a foreign party. Allowing a foreign government or intelligence service access to classified and potentially damaging information causes a security dilemma in itself. This shared intelligence could be used against the U.S. in the future by recruiting double agents to spy for a foreign government from within the U.S. community. An American by the name of Jonathan Pollard was recruited by the Israelis to

provide satellite imagery of Iraq.⁵ While this intelligence was not used against the U.S., its disclosure was not part of the American-Israeli cooperation agreement. Intelligence services frequently establish liaison relationships. Who is to say that the information being exchanged will not be tainted and used for clandestine operations against their host? Taking this one step further, many intelligence services and governments share satellite technology and often assist cooperation members with SIGINT. Is there any guarantee that our own technology will not be used against us if operated by a foreign government? If a foreign government is allowed access to our technology, we are placing a dangerously high level of trust in potentially damaging hands:

“Countries are always concerned that the information that they share could end up in the hands of a third party, either accidentally or intentionally” (Bensahel 40)

Of course this is all usually done with the FIS of a friendly government, but what is to stop them from walking in once we open that door.

While there are clearly many costs to intelligence cooperation, there are also many benefits. By cooperating with other states in a regime or institution, a state will be able to maximize its own gains by reinforcing the gains of others. This will then allow the U.S. to focus on areas where we are able to operate most effectively.

For all of the United States' state of the art technology and overwhelming military capability, the U.S. can not thoroughly monitor every country or group that is deemed a security threat. Intelligence cooperation affords a high degree of burden sharing. This should not be viewed as passing off work the U.S. does not want to do, but that in which the U.S. can not do for lack of resources or capability. With a strong military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, military forces are stretched very thin and most of the U.S. intelligence focus is on these regions. A FIS can pick up the slack in regions where a threat exists, but may not warrant a strong U.S. presence.

A second benefit to intelligence cooperation is that a FIS will have access to a region that the U.S. may not be able to infiltrate successfully. A FIS will have a greater chance of working successfully in a potentially hostile region because it is not American. Employing regional specialists and people with a native knowledge of a particular area will have knowledge of local customs and traditions that an American can never have. This knowledge is a particular asset in countries that have a long history of tribalism and adherence to regionally specific norms that are not taught in books or in the classroom. Members of a FIS will be able to go where the U.S. can not. HUMINT is not easy to come by, especially when dealing with a terrorist cell. A FIS officer has a better chance of gaining access to and acceptance from groups that are highly attentive to possible informers. It is these officers that can get by undetected better than an American.

Sharing the burden and the ability to gain access to areas where the U.S. can not is part of the comparative advantage that a FIS has over the U.S. It is because of this advantage that the U.S. should rely on foreign intelligence:

“All intelligence agencies enjoy certain comparative advantages. In some cases, these may derive from functional, tradecraft, or technical attribution—largely based on specialization expertise, knowledge resources or technological solutions. In other instances the comparative advantage of intelligence services may derive from geography, where they enjoy a locational advantage, or from a socio-cultural affinity” (Rudner 216).

A FIS will have intelligence capabilities that we do not or that we can not utilize to its maximum benefit. Instead of trying to do everything and be anywhere when we obviously can not, it is

more beneficial to U.S. security and the U.S. intelligence community to focus on the areas where they can achieve that maximum benefit. Cooperating with a FIS allows the U.S. to gain the most information possible while not bearing the costs of unnecessary intelligence failures. Because the U.S. will no longer have to focus on a particular region or a specific intelligence gathering operation that yields minimal results and benefits, they can instead divert that attention to areas where they can maximize that intelligence benefit. A FIS is therefore vital to bridging the gaps in American intelligence gathering and analysis. Why should the U.S. waste valuable money, time, and manpower on something that another country can achieve at a lower cost and with better results?

Aside from gathering and sharing intelligence with a FIS, the U.S. intelligence community is now in the position to learn from other intelligence services. Terrorism is nothing new to other parts of the world. Europe and Israel have been dealing with terrorism for decades. Working with the intelligence services in Europe, Israel, and other states will provide invaluable lessons in counterterrorism to our intelligence community. Learning how other states have dealt with terrorism and other threats is beneficial to the U.S. because other states will have more direct experience than we do. How has the Mossad dealt with Hamas? How did MI5 deal with the IRA? How did the Spanish handle ETA? What can we learn from the Russian effort to quell the situation in Chechnya? How have the Colombians succeeded in their work with the FARC? How did they fail? The U.S. must keep in mind that as far as terrorist attacks on home soil are concerned, we are the new kids on the block. Why not engage other countries with a record of counterterrorism to educate our intelligence and security communities on the lessons of terror that they have learned? Finding out what has worked and what has not worked abroad will only enhance our own counterterrorism efforts. Providing our intelligence services with a greater opportunity for education with a FIS is one way we could learn from one of our intelligence allies. Not only is working with a FIS beneficial to our own intelligence, but it provides us the opportunity to share and exchange information on intelligence gathering techniques and technology, not to mention the regional and area knowledge we could stand to gain.

Lastly, cooperation between an intelligence service and state and local law enforcement can provide another route by which information can be shared. Because law enforcement agencies function under a different set of guidelines and operational directives than an intelligence agency, they will be approaching the security mandate from a different perspective. Bringing in outside resources beyond the intelligence sector, but still related to issues of security and intelligence is one more way to bolster intelligence cooperation and collaboration in detecting and thwarting threats. Integrated cooperation between these two communities will add a new dimension to threat assessment and security management.

Conclusion

After looking at international intelligence from a cost-benefit perspective, intelligence cooperation is clearly more beneficial than costly. While there are many issues that can make intelligence cooperation problematic, these issues can easily be overcome. In order for cooperation to be effective, there must be some balance in the sharing of intelligence. Establishing a cooperative symmetry is therefore in the best interest of the parties involved. Of course, given the ever changing state of geopolitics, this relationship can be one sided at times. In order to keep the relationship from deteriorating, counterbalancing the sharing of intelligence with the cooperative partner should be a priority to maintaining the relationship. For example, the use of financial incentives, such as economic aid packages or establishing a trade partnership is one way of enticing a foreign government to cooperate and to help offset any imbalances that may arise. Another way is to provide security and intelligence services to a government that might not have the capacity for protecting itself.

A second way to overcome cooperative issues is to establish and maintain credibility within the global intelligence community. The U.S. must actively signal to their international counterparts that they can and will cooperate effectively. Establishing trust through confidence building is one such step towards building credibility.

The U.S. must embrace the fact that we can not do everything ourselves and that what we can do may not achieve the best results. Just because the U.S. has the best technology does not mean it will yield the best intelligence. Knowing where the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. intelligence lie is the key to enhancing intelligence gathering, analysis, and gaining optimum results. Ignoring where the deficiencies are will only harm the ability of the intelligence community to act effectively and efficiently. Working with a FIS to bridge intelligence gaps and pick up what may fall through the cracks is the way to achieve optimum results and enhance our own intelligence capabilities.

Intelligence cooperation is nothing new, but it is now more apparent than ever before just how important these cooperative relationships can be. Working with a FIS is one of the best ways to gather intelligence. They are able to penetrate regions where we can not. A FIS is better equipped to deal with local populations that are hostile to the U.S. They can get through undetected and will have a more successful rate of cultural and societal immersion than we could ever have. A FIS will have native knowledge of regional customs and a higher degree of appreciation for these customs. They will be able to operate within these cultures far easier than we can and will therefore have the ability to gather intelligence that we could not. Recognizing the utility of regional specialists and FIS officers will only add to the intelligence gathering and analytical process, thus augmenting U.S. intelligence capabilities. This in turn will enhance threat assessment abilities which will improve our efforts in maintaining state security.

Many of the documents pertaining to intelligence cooperation remain classified. Therefore one can only assume and make predictions about some of these relationships. But the data that is available indicates that these cooperative relationships are better to have than not. In the case of international intelligence cooperation, the uncertainty and the costs are more than worth the risks.

Notes

1. See "Transatlantic Intelligence and Security Cooperation"
2. See Rudner
3. See Aldrich "Transatlantic Intelligence and Security Cooperation"
4. Silverstein, Ken. "Official Pariah Sudan Valuable to America's War on Terror" Los Angeles Times April 29, 2005. A.1. Online. ProQuest.
5. See "Mossad-CIA Cooperation" by Ephraim Kahana

Bibliography

1. Segell, Glen M. "Intelligence Relations Between the European Union and the U.S." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 2004, 17:1, 81-96. Online. Taylor and Francis. March 21, 2006.
2. Bensahel, Nora. "A Coalition of Coalitions: International Cooperation against Terrorism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 2006, 29:35-49. Online. Taylor and Francis. March 20, 2006.

3. Lefebvre, Stephane. "The Difficulties and Dilemmas of International Intelligence Cooperation." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. 2003, 16:4, 527-542. Online. Taylor and Francis. March 20, 2006.
4. Kahana, Ephraim. "Mossad-CIA Cooperation." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. 2001, 14:3, 409-420. Online. Taylor and Francis. March 14, 2006.
5. Warner, Michael. "Intelligence Transformation and Intelligence Liaison". *SAIS Review*. Winter 2001, 24:1. Online. Proquest. March 28, 2006.
6. Aldrich, Richard J. "Dangerous Liaisons." *Harvard International Review*. Fall 2002, 24:3, 50-55. Online. ProQuest. March 21, 2006.
7. Aldrich, Richard J. "Transatlantic Intelligence and Security Cooperation." *International Affairs*. 2004, 80:4, 731-753. Online. March 20, 2006.
8. Rudner, Martin. "Hunters and Gatherers: The Intelligence Coalition Against Islamic Terrorism." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. 2004, 17:2, 193-230. Online. Taylor and Francis. March 21, 2006.
9. United States. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington: October 2005. Online. www.globalsecurity.org. March 14, 2006.
10. Fessenden, Helen. "The Limits of Intelligence Reform." *Foreign Affairs*. Nov/Dec 2005, 84:6, p.106. Online. ProQuest. March 21, 2006.

About the author

Marta Sparago is currently a second year Masters student at the Center for Global Affairs at New York University. Her areas of interest are terrorism and national security. Ms. Sparago also holds a BA in History from Columbia University.