

In Pursuit of Synergy:

An Analysis of HUMINT and the Importance of Other Collection Disciplines

Rachel Ferrari

Professor Beyoghlou

GOVT-426: The US Intelligence Community

1 March 2018

In the process of gathering intelligence for analysis and eventual dissemination to policymakers, members of the US Intelligence Community (IC) have several options for going about collecting that information. These options include but are not limited to human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), geospatial imagery intelligence (GEOINT), measurement and signals intelligence (MASINT), and open-source intelligence (OSINT).¹ While HUMINT is widely considered to be the centerpiece of the IC, the other forms of intelligence gathering are equally as important and should be recognized as integral to the overall process. To support and demonstrate this position, I argue that they are necessary due to their unique capabilities, the varying costs and risks associated with HUMINT that make it a high-risk choice for intelligence gathering, and the importance of collaboration among the various collection disciplines (INTs).

First of all, one key aspect to consider is the fact that other INTs each have unique capabilities that are crucial to US national security but cannot be carried out using HUMINT due to the nature of the information. For example, Allied codebreakers using early SIGINT during World War II were able to decode signal messages from the Axis powers and use that information to inform US strategy decisions.² Its impact on the outcome of WWII is emphasized in *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies* by Loch Johnson and James Wirtz:

Army signals intelligence analysts succeeded in breaking and exploiting the code systems used by the Imperial Japanese Army, producing intelligence which many believe shortened the war in the Pacific[....] This significant naval intelligence capability, on par with the British and Polish decryption of the German code, allowed the Americans to defeat the Japanese at the Battle of Midway and to countermeasure the Japanese during the rest of the war in the Pacific.

¹ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 156.

² Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27.

Clearly, this intelligence gathering was vital in helping the United States win the war, and it was only made possible due to the use of SIGINT. Today, SIGINT also has the ability to handle and process the avalanche of information readily available using keyword searching, as well as allow the tracking of signal patterns over time using content and traffic analyses.³ These techniques of analyzing message communications open up an entire new world that HUMINT could not access solely on its own. Then, GEOINT also allows the IC to gain information about targets such as foreign bases and weapons stockpiles using remote satellite images that are constantly improving in quality and resolution.⁴ This technological collection is key for gathering the images that would be impractical to access otherwise. In addition, MASINT is useful for many of the same reasons: it can use technology to track the development of weapons and the industrial capabilities of a country or transnational group far beyond what people could do using HUMINT alone.⁵ OSINT is another often-overlooked part of the IC; today, commercial satellites have driven down the cost of aerial photo reconnaissance, and an abundance of open sources have made it much easier to gather large amounts of information quickly.⁶ Therefore, simply by nature of the technology, HUMINT could not carry out all of those functions on its own, since they are out of the scope of what humans alone can achieve. As a result, as useful as HUMINT is, the US cannot focus solely on it because it would miss out on a wide variety of useful information gathering methods.

Also, the use of HUMINT is often limited by considerations of cost and risk. While some technical INTs have a higher physical cost in terms of dollars spent on equipment, research,

³ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 127.

⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

⁵ *Ibid*, 140

⁶ From in-class lecture and OSINT speakers on February 22, 2018.

development, maintenance, and other logistical issues,⁷ HUMINT unfortunately has a very high price in human lives when things go wrong, and there is always a high possibility of assets being discovered and killed. In addition, HUMINT also comes at a much greater national security risk, since it relies on the trustworthiness of human beings, who can have varying connections to dangerous people and questionable motivations for doing the things that they do. Even when strictly vetted, anyone can turn into a double agent and use their position in the Intelligence Community to the benefit of a hostile foreign country. Aldrich Ames is one infamous example of a CIA agent who ended up committing espionage and giving out sensitive information.⁸ Other INTs do not have to worry about this possibility as much; while technology can fail or give ambiguous intelligence, it does not have a mind of its own or the ability to actively decide to betray the IC. So in that way, the IC must always be cautious of its HUMINT assets and be on the lookout for malevolent activity, and there is no way to avoid that issue entirely.

Finally, collaboration among the various INTs and the agencies that specialize in them is key for establishing an efficient and cooperative environment in the IC. Collectors using HUMINT and the others have to support each other and work together in pursuit of the ultimate goal of supporting policymakers.⁹ Indeed, this concept is captured in the term *all-source intelligence*, explained as “intelligence based on as many collection sources as possible to compensate for the shortcomings of each and to profit from their combined strength.”¹⁰ According to this idea, the overall advantages and disadvantages to each INT should ideally balance out and provide the maximum benefits for the IC. This can be difficult in practice due to

⁷ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 116.

⁸ *Ibid*, 140.

⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

the stovepiping problem,¹¹ where individual agencies that primarily handle certain INTs, such as the CIA with HUMINT or the NSA with SIGINT, fail to communicate properly and are wary of sharing information. Since some agencies deal with certain collection disciplines more often, the stovepipe problem can carry over and affect coordination between the INTs as well. In some cases, rivalries have even created new issues for the IC or caused it to miss key signals altogether.¹² Indeed, the lack of communication and info sharing among agencies has been a key factor in problems in the past, such as with Pearl Harbor, when certain members of the IC monitoring Japanese propaganda noticed a marked increase in the tone of the rhetoric used, but failed to share that with the others who might have taken additional steps to discover the plan.¹³ Clearly, the agencies and the INTs must establish and maintain mutual trust in order to achieve “collection synergy,”¹⁴ which is the efficiency that comes from coordination and working together. This would also help with balancing HUMINT’s “competing collection priorities”¹⁵ and having to prioritize their assets’ time; working with several types of collection disciplines means that the IC is better able to make those prioritizing decisions without having to overlook important issues.

In summary, while HUMINT is often thought of as the central jewel of the IC, it is clear that the other INTs make unique and vital contributions, and can therefore be preferable in many collection situations, depending on the requirements of policymakers. They also carry fewer risks than HUMINT, which must, by necessity, perpetually work to prevent and overcome the inherent

¹¹ From in-class lecture on January 25, 2018.

¹² Amy Zegart, “Origins of the Central Intelligence Agency: ‘Those Spooky Boys,’ *Intelligence and the National Security Strategist: Enduring Issues and Challenges* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 31.

¹³ From in-class lecture on

¹⁴ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 128.

risks associated with human assets. Finally, they play an important role in interagency collaboration and guiding the work of other INTs and the community as a whole. This is important because the differing costs and benefits among all of the INTs, including HUMINT, must be weighed in deciding to which to use in any given situation, and often their working together allows the community to make discoveries that it otherwise would not be able to make. As a result, it is crucial that their impact is not overlooked or downplayed, especially when it comes to things like funding, which allows the collectors to carry out operations to the best of their ability. Metaphorically speaking, HUMINT might be the crown jewel of the IC, but any good crown features many different jewels, so the other INTs are absolutely needed to complement HUMINT and fulfill the varied and nuanced roles that they are each given to carry out.

Bibliography

Johnson, Loch and James Wirtz. *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Lowenthal, Mark. *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2017.

Zegart, Amy. "Origins of the Central Intelligence Agency: 'Those Spooky Boys.'" *Intelligence and the National Security Strategist: Enduring Issues and Challenges*. Eds. Roger George and Robert Kline. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

In-class lectures and speakers