

Handbook of Global Security and Intelligence: National Approaches

Intelligence in Public Literature

Peter Gill, Mark Phythian, Stuart Farson, and Shlomo Shpiro, eds.:
Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008, 700 pp, index.

Reviewed by Michael Warner

Nations build different military systems to reflect their differing goals and needs in employing force against real and potential enemies. They build different intelligence systems for similar reasons, and thus, in the spirit of Clausewitz, we can ponder what it is that stays the same in intelligence systems across cultures and time periods. If we can find that, perhaps we can compare how and why intelligence systems vary over time, and how they vary from one another.¹

An international team of scholars has launched perhaps the most ambitious project to date for comparing intelligence systems. In their work, the *Handbook of Global Security and Intelligence*, 36 contributing authors have compared the intelligence systems of 30 nations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas (only one African system—South Africa's—could be included). The effort deserves praise for both the attempt and its results.

The editors of the *Handbook* asked their contributing authors to draft their chapters to speak to the effects of common factors that presumably influence all intelligence systems. The chapters are not comparisons per

se; each describes one intelligence system, but the structure of the project allows for such comparisons to be made with greater ease. For this purpose, the *Handbook* explains that intelligence systems vary across national contexts according to two variables: “Strategic Environment” and “Regime Type.”

The *Handbook*’s method produces useful evidence that is both contemporaneous and orderly thanks to the authors’ attention to these two variables. The Strategic Environment variable is a serviceable proxy for a nation’s “grand strategy”—its posture toward countries that can help or harm it. States are never themselves wholly independent actors in international affairs; indeed, much of what they do on a daily basis is caused or conditioned by real and imagined events and trends around them. Still, one wishes the editors had expanded the Strategic Environment variable—or added a third variable—to account for the geopolitical goals and aspirations of a nation’s leaders. While many national leaders may feel themselves swept along by historical tides, there have been some important ones who saw their nations as shapers of history. How did they wish intelligence to serve them in their projects? A few of the *Handbook*’s authors bring such considerations into their essays on national intelligence systems, but if it is important enough to consider in some essays, then perhaps it is important enough for them all.

The *Handbook*’s employment of Regime Type as an independent variable is overdue among works of intelligence theory. This seems likely to become a key field of inquiry for intelligence studies as they expand outward from studying the Anglo-American systems and those in the Western orbit. As with the Strategic Environment variable, however, I would add that the *Handbook* could have done more. Peter Gill and Mark Phythian have elsewhere observed that nonstate actors (at least those disposed and prepared to use lethal force) practice intelligence as well. It follows that intelligence systems in states and some nonstate actors can be compared with one another. And yet, the work done to date, and in the *Handbook*, comprises almost entirely descriptions of state-based systems. The exceptions—for European counterterrorism cooperation and for the Palestine National Authority—make a promising start in the direction of examining intelligence in nonstate sovereignties. If we posit that nonstate actors can employ intelligence methods as skillfully and ruthlessly as some states, then we must broaden the aperture in successor projects to consider nonstate intelligence systems as well.

The *Handbook*’s only real lack is that of sustained attention to how

technology factors into different intelligence systems. The way in which a regime orders and practices intelligence has a great deal to do with its technological environment. Changes in technology, by altering both the threats to the regime and opportunities available to it (for economic, military, and intelligence pursuits), have direct and indirect effects on a regime's intelligence work. Technology, in short, helps to determine the objects of intelligence and the means that intelligence employs. In consequence, it also helps determine the numbers and sorts of intelligence officers hired to mount operations and to collect and analyze data, the ways in which those officers are tasked and organized, and the methods by which they can disseminate information to decisionmakers. The *Handbook* offers a snapshot of these changes in midstride, without really explaining how technology has and is likely to reshape intelligence systems. Today the digital revolution makes all sorts of intelligence much cheaper; small states and nonstate actors can now practice espionage and covert action against the largest states, with comparatively little expense and less risk to themselves. This development makes the study of how nonstates organize and task their intelligence systems, as noted above, all the more important.

The *Handbook* represents a big step forward. It is a valuable set of cross-national comparisons of intelligence systems informed by intelligence theory and centered around significant independent variables. It cannot be the last word on this subject, but it represents progress toward true comparisons of intelligence systems—one that both the historians and the political scientists, and devotees of other disciplines, may well wish to join. With the addition of a technology variable—particularly one that can explain the trajectory of the revolution caused by digitization—sequels to the *Handbook* will be even more useful.

Reviewer: Michael Warner is the DNI historian. He is a former member of the *Studies in Intelligence* Editorial Board and a frequent contributor.

Footnotes

1 An intelligence system can be thought of as the collective authorities, resources, tasks, and oversight assigned to officials who are seeking to inform and facilitate a regime's objectives by fragile and provocative means.

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