`TRIBAL TONGUES` PHENOMENON – INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses an important topic on the agenda of the intelligence studies, namely the consumer–producer relations as regards the intelligence cycle. Far from being an easy to grasp subject, the debate is significant at least for the persistent fears expressed by the public opinion about intelligence being politicized. We highlight the idea that by definition the intelligence activity may be considered politicized and the challenge would be to better clarify the term `politicized`. The tribal tongues phenomenon characterize the intelligence–policy relation as the two tribes have divergent perspectives and missions. While the intelligence is invested with attributes like objectivity and expertize, the policy realm speaks the language of subjectivity and preferences.

Therefore, understanding and discussing the consumer–producer relations (a syntagm used in intelligence studies) is of highest importance, given that intelligence can be after all easily politicized as long as it is defined as an adjunct to policy.

KEYWORDS: *intelligence, policy, politicized, role, defining*

INTRODUCTION

The expression `tribal tongues` was first formulated by Mark Lowenthal (1992) in order to describe the relation between intelligence and policy. The theme of intelligence–policy relation in a democratic society is a matter of vital importance as intelligence agencies exist in order to support political decisions and are specifically designed to collect and interpret information about the international security environment. As the role of intelligence in national security is uncertain the issue represents a basic problem (Rovner 2011). The question is a major theme of reflection for thinkers and specialists in the field of Intelligence Studies, an academic discipline that has a relatively short history. Intelligently, Warner (2014, 25) emphasizes the relevance of having such an academic field of study by pointing the same idea: even if espionage has a long history and got along just fine for thousands of years without much scholarly reflection, longevity does not automatically mean understanding, thus confirming the need for an academic approach of intelligence. The first book considered representative for this field of study was written by Sherman Kent in 1949.

Being a major theme in intelligence studies, defining the relation between policy and intelligence involves defining the role of intelligence. Usually, the role of intelligence is expressed in terms like to support policy makers, yet the support might presume myriad ways to perform the task. Traditionally, intelligence agencies exist for four reasons: to avoid strategic surprise, to provide long-term expertise, to support policy process and to maintain the secrecy (Lowenthal 2015, 2). Without a constant resort to political decisions, the intelligence process has no reason. To ignore the knowledge interests of the political factors would mean to abandon the basic mission of the intelligence organizations. The intelligence services are designed to offer expertise and knowledge related to subjects which have a profound socio-political implications. Shulsky and Schmitt (2002, xii) express the same idea, intelligence should have become, less of a "cloak and dagger" affair and more like a branch of the social sciences, seeking to analyze and ultimately predict political, economic, social, and military matters.

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`Intelligence estimates play an important role in strategic judgment, adding unique kinds of information and insight to help leaders cope with the inherent uncertainty and complexity of international politics.` (Rovner 2011, vii)

The difficulty of the relation is of highest importance, given that intelligence can be after all easily politicized as long as it is defined as an adjunct to policy. The tribal tongues phenomenon suggests that the intelligence – policy relation are inherently difficult as the two tribes have somehow divergent perspectives and missions. While the intelligence is invested with attributes like objectivity and expertize, the policy realm speaks the language of subjectivity and preferences.

Therefore, understanding and discussing the consumer – producer relations involves the theme of politicization of intelligence, usually perceived in pejorative terms, as a negative aspect. The syntagm is not well clarified and understood, being an ambiguous concept.

POLITICIZATION OF INTELLIGENCE MAY COME IN MANY FLAVORS

The relationship intelligence–policy is a complicated one. Most specialists think that the ideal relation between intelligence and policymakers should be defined by two terms: objectivity and relevance. If the intelligence analysts would be totally independent, then their products would probably not address the political dilemmas. The other way round, if the relation would be too close between the two tribes that would affect the objectivity of the analysis. Rovner (2011) notices that `the existing literature on intelligence-policy relations relies on ambiguous concepts that are alternately confusing, all encompassing, or contradictory. *Politicization* in particular seems to have as many definitions as there are authors using the term.`

The politicization of intelligence can be perceived as well as inevitable and a must. The policy makers play a central role for every step composing the intelligence cycle and it would be a big mistake to be excluded. The policymakers must be understood as being less than the beneficiaries of the intelligence products, in fact they are the key players in designing the intelligence cycle. The relationship between the intelligence producers and intelligence consumers has important consequences for intelligence process. Even if there is a negative perception, that intelligence politicization is a bad thing, it is important to understand that defining politicization is even more important. Why? The intelligence agencies do not have political interests *per se*, yet the intelligence analysis must have relevance for political decisions, in order to improve the capacity to rationalize ends and strategies, to reduce the inherent uncertainty when taking decisions and acting on international scene.

 From a theoretical point of view, the intelligence services must be free in their endeavor to objectively analyze information, even if the data analyzed have political relevance and the analysis might formulate points of view that may sustain or invalidate some political options. Therefore, it is important not to ignore the political needs as the intelligence organizations must serve the society by providing expertize on different political, social, economic subjects. If the intelligence services provide information without being asked for, those intelligence products have little chances not to be taken into account.

The role of intelligence services is very important within the socio–political system, therefore it is important to be clarified. The modality the government relates to intelligence represents the key in configuring the role of intelligence services for the society. Translating into practice is the hardest thing. Understanding the intelligence services as being `specifically designed to collect and interpret information about the international security environment` is a very flawed definition. It is not relevant to affirm that the core task of intelligence agencies is that of collecting information. By comparison, defining science as being nothing more than a process of `collecting data and interpreting information` would imply saying nothing relevant about its core mission. Likewise, defining intelligence agencies as collectors and analyzers of information says nothing important about their missions: as instruments used by policymakers in governance. A syntagm like `the parallel state` would better describe a pathological relation between intelligence and policy, an undesirable social

condition, and at the other extreme would be the excessive harmony, another pathological relation. Within the literature of intelligence studies there have been identified and discussed many aspects that characterize pathological politicization, named as following: embedded assumptions, intelligence parochialism, bureaucratic parochialism, partisan intelligence, intelligence as scapegoat etc. As the intelligence tribe and the policy tribe speak different languages, the interaction is difficult. It is not something new that intelligence-policy relations do not always go well. The relations are occasionally poisonous (Rovner 2011).

A certain degree of politicization of the intelligence is unavoidable, as the relation between the tribes is configured, as we have explained in an article entitled *Intelligence and IR Constructivism* (Leucea 2020), by a strategic culture and by paradigms adopted in interpreting the international security environment.

ASSESSING THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND THE INTELLIGENCE CYCLE

We may assume that the `politicization` of intelligence starts from the very beginning of the intelligence cycle. Most specialists in intelligence studies do not consider the policy maker a part of the intelligence cycle, although there are authors (Lowenthal 2014, Schreier 2010) who think that the policy maker should be included within the intelligence process and that it would be a mistake to be excluded. The political leaders are not just the beneficiaries of the intelligence products but they are the ones who configure the entire intelligence process by establishing the intelligence requirements. Without a constant connection to policy makers` requirements, the intelligence process has no ends and no meaning.

`*The intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.*` *(*Rovner 2011,)

A key component in linking the intelligence and policy tribes are the estimates of the international security environment, estimates which fundament the national security strategy, for instance. The assessment of the international security environment is an extremely complicated task. As we stated in a previous article (Leucea 2017), the difficulty of assessing the international security environment is similar to the academic endeavor to conceptualize the international systems in world history, theoretical instruments being necessary to be developed. Theoreticians of the world systems apprehend that the systemic perspective is created by the analyst. The same, the assessment of the international security environment depends on implicit or explicit assumed theoretical lenses. The policymakers and intelligence officers most often than not have divergent perspectives on national security policy and strategy, but in the process of conceiving the national security strategy both tribes are very much involved.

The intelligence requirements are not abstract concepts, but compose a security agenda. As theoreticians of the international systems notice, the systemic perspective of the international security environment is firstly and inevitably a theoretical artefact. In conceiving the national security strategy both tribes contribute. We may affirm that the intelligence gaps may be generated as well by the articulation between intelligence and policy in assessing the international security environment: prioritized topics by defining them as having national security relevance constructs as well the doctrine of intelligence collection. Intelligence agencies plan intelligence collection in accordance with national security estimates assumed and presented in strategic documents like the national security strategy. Formulations as `the international environment is constantly changing`, `the security environment is characterized mainly by the following major tendencies` or `the main risks and threats that can put in danger the national security of Romania are…` leave the impression of objective descriptions of the security environment but are imbued with subjectivism and are dependent on a particular security agenda.

Therefore, the political leaders are, in fact, the first organizers of the intelligence process, and here is the very moment the `politicization` starts. That is the reason some experts advocate the intelligence cycle must incorporate the decision maker. The national security strategy is created by a political process in relation with the intelligence process. For

instance, Peter Jackson (2005, 15-18) highlights that the identification and interpretation of risks is a political activity, the possibility that the intelligence products to be influenced/biased by the policymakers' perception being present during the entire intelligence cycle. From scratch, the political assumptions determines the risks prioritization and interpretation, a key aspect that influences the security agenda, the data collection as it prefigures which information is relevant for national security.

Therefore, the politicization of intelligence may come in different flavors but the first step would be the national security strategy, respectively the assessment of the international security environment. The systemic ideological biases are functioning as cultural/perceptive lenses and are used in interpreting the world, playing an important role in selecting and identifying the security risks. From the very beginning of the intelligence process, assessing the international security environment is inherently influenced by cultural/theoretical filters used by intelligence analysts and policy makers in their construction the map of the international system, decisively influencing the manner in which the environment is perceived. The IR specialists emphasize the idea of a mediated perception of the international security environment:

`It is equally important to analyze the manner in which the world politics is studied, the process of theorizing becoming a subject itself.` (Burchill & Linklater 2005)

The assessment of the international security environment is not explicit in stating and assuming the impossibility in maintaining the distance between the knowledgeable subject and the object of study. The assessment is inherently subjective and can be considered an artefact being dependent on particular paradigmatic stances. The question of the role of theories for science is a fundamental one for any academic subject, yet the assessment of the international security environment leaves the impression of objectivity but it can as well be a source of misperception in international politics. Probably that is the reason the most common type of intelligence politicization is the tendency to configure the intelligence analysis in a manner which confirms and fills the policies underway (Jackson 2005, 15-18). That type of politicization determines the intelligence producers to confirm the expectances of the policymakers in order to avoid being marginalized, ignored or excluded.

A very dangerous situation, favored by the relativity determined by the perceptive lenses, would be that of using intelligence services as instruments in implementing politics. At the same time, specialists highlight (Schreier 2010, 145) the need to expand the policymakers` role in strategic warning in order to overcome producer–consumer disconnects.

`Strategic warning should be reconfigured as a governmental responsibility rather than an intelligence responsibility. Policymakers will have to make the challenging decisions about resource commitments for defense against future threats should have a direct role at every phase of the strategic warning process.` (Schreier 2010, 145)

Another remarkable specialist in intelligence studies, Gregory Treverton (2004), invokes a 'real intelligence cycle' composed of five phases. The author formulates that in reality the intelligence community 'infers' the needs of policy-makers. David Omand (2014, 66) as well mentions that in reality policy-makers are too busy – and often not sufficiently expert – to articulate their requirements. Instead the requirements are inferred by members of the intelligence community.

CONCLUSIONS

The tribal tongues phenomenon challenges much more the task to frame intelligence not as a specific activity or separate entity but rather in a broad context of knowledge production (Agrell & Treverton 2015, 3). To better frame intelligence and convey its meaning around the concept of science would mean facilitating finding answers to questions like those formulated by Mark Lowenthall (2009): what happens if the policy makers do not decide, find that they cannot decide, or fail to convey their priorities to the intelligence community? Who sets intelligence priorities then?

The intelligence – policy relation is a multifaceted phenomenon and has an evolving character. We may assume that the dynamics of the international security environment compel the relation between the two tribes to be as flexible and adaptable as the winds of change propel.

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