# INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

# INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGENCE LIAISON: BENEFITS AND DANGERS

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**Abstract:**
*Liaison between intelligence services is based on necessity and not on friendship, and it bears both benefits due to exchanges of information, coverage of intelligence gaps and shared operational costs, but it also has risks. The latter is given by the differences in the foreign policy of countries and their unequal perception of threats, observed in disproportionalities of resources allocated and power distribution to mitigate a perceived threat. Additionally to these, one of the most damaging aspects to intelligence cooperation agreement is the unauthorised disclosure, a consequence of insufficient national laws to regulate and protect intelligence cooperation; or due to vulnerabilities of an intelligence service caused by the presence of a penetration agent. Finding the balance between the benefits and dangers it is not an easy task which challenges the very need for liaison. This article argues that a pragmatic approach based on mutual interests and benefits will always outcome the risks associated with this activity.*

**Keywords:** *information, intelligence, liaison, espionage, cooperation.*

## Introduction

International intelligence cooperation between different and competitive organisations bear advantages and encounters difficulties, both driven by the perception of threats, national interests, foreign policy objectives, economic resources and intelligence needs. International intelligence liaison goes beyond national borders, and usually "depends on leaders and politicians" to facilitate it (Stafford & Rhodri, 2000, p. 2). In a traditional sense, liaison profits from the sharing of raw or processed information under the form of intelligence

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reports and assessments, or it can take a "wide range of forms and degrees" like operational access, influence or other long-term benefits (Westerfield, 1996, p. 523). A more complex interpretation highlights the advantages of cooperation under the form of training assistance, advice and logistics support, with or without participation in joint surveillance, joint source handling and covert activities or special operations (Lander, 2004). However, with all the benefits of international intelligence liaison, James Olson (2001) stressed the essence of intelligence services by underlining their nationally-orientated agendas: "there are friendly nations, but no friendly intelligence services" (Olson, 2001:83). This article will discuss the importance of international intelligence liaison by highlighting the benefits and the risks, and arguing that liaison takes place out of necessity, contrary to the simplistic "friendship, confidence and trust" perception of cooperation.

## The benefits of intelligence liaison

International intelligence liaison is necessary "in the face of a common threat" (Munton, 2009, p. 126). In most cases, the threat cannot be addressed unilaterally by a single nation due to the adversary's technological advancement and military resources, or the "informal, mobile, variably organised and unpredictable" character of a non-state actor threat (Lander, 2004, p. 492). The Nazi threat led to cooperation between the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Russian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in German-occupied territories, while the Soviet threat after WWII led to cooperation between the United States and West Germany to counteract Soviet operations and expansion of their influence. While these examples may seem obsolete, the 9/11 attacks reminisced the "fundamental tension between an increasingly networked world, which is ideal terrain for the new religious terrorism, and highly compartmentalized national intelligence-gathering", emphasising the need for better liaison practices (Aldrich, 2004, p. 734). The 2004 bombings in Spain and the 2005 London suicide attacks brought additional awareness to the necessity of cooperation, making Spain to understand the need for a transnational approach to terrorism. Spain

sent attachés to "Libya and Morocco, to Mauritania in the increasingly important Sahel region, to Syria and Jordan in the Middle East" and signed agreements on countering terrorism with Mali and Algeria (Reinares, 2009, p. 381). The London bombings tragically exemplified an additional dimension of terrorism identified in internally and home-grown terrorists with influence from abroad, which made Britons more aware and susceptible to the need for international cooperation to counteract a common threat.

Intelligence liaison covers the gaps in intelligence coverage, access and expertise. Reaching out to other intelligence agencies allows external input to tackle the roots of the problem, and posture-shifting from reactive actions (countering or preventing attacks through tight security measures) to strategic / long-term effects. A strategic response is destroying the capability of an organisation, as exemplified by the cutting of the supply line of explosive materials, as occurred with Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in 1987 when the French authorities captured the MV Eksund arms ship. Additional examples during the Cold War support the same argument in favour of liaison for broad coverage and expertise. A lack of technical proficiency during the Cold War required the US to rely on the Germans to provide "assistance in breaking foreign diplomatic and spy codes, a science heavily dependent on advanced mathematical and computer skills in which Germans have traditionally excelled" (Johnson & Freyberg, 1997, p. 168). Also, offensive operations required intelligence liaison to facilitate access to information beyond the Iron Curtain, and foreign expertise in these countries' administrative procedures for the infiltration of US spies. US-Israeli cooperation in the early 1950s favoured the US in obtaining through Jewish immigrants information about travel documents, food rations, military installations, factories and rail networks in communist countries. In return, Israel received modern training in technical intelligence and satellite imagery of areas of interest in neighbouring Arab countries (Kahana, 2001).

Intelligence cooperation also allows the extension of collection activities by overcoming geographical limits. America's isolated position initially impeded the creation of its international spy networks, an aspect later on compensated by cooperation with the German

foreign intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendiest (BND). During the Cold War, West German's geographical location allowed an "ideal base for US intelligence operations directed against the Soviet bête noire" (Johnson & Freyberg, 1997, p. 167). In the former British Crown Colonies, cooperation between the US and the United Kingdom proved invaluable, as the UK maintained airbases, naval installations and technical facilities which helped the US to physically access these areas and extend its political influence (Aldrich, 1998). The UK was also an appreciated liaison partner as it retained human expertise in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, and, because of the PIRA, it had "unrivalled experience of dealing (in Northern Ireland) with a major and long-running terrorist threat" (Lander, 2004, p. 487). The US also overcame its geographical limitations through liaising with European neutral countries, which improved its capability of monitoring and scrutinising the Soviet territories in the post-WWII years.

A further benefit of intelligence cooperation is that intelligence cooperation reduces operational costs by joint manning of important facilities, missions / operations, and installations. Technical cooperation in signals intelligence is especially important, as it allows the combined use of already limited and expensive technical resources. Although it might prove problematic because of the asset's de-confliction and mission coordination schedule, an agreement in this regard almost certainly exists. This agreement allows for each entity to better distribute the technical and the human resources and monitor different areas of interest, later on exchanging the information or the assessments (e.g. 1946 US-UK signal intelligence agreement; Echelon system; BBC Monitoring cooperation with US Open Source Enterprise). While in the information field cooperation is achievable mostly without major consequences, at the tactical / operational level of kinetic missions with possible human casualties there is a high risk in synchronising forces. Cooperation presents difficulties given by the needs of a partner to act first or to obtain a certain outcome, in addition to the necessity of shared responsibility of success or failure, and the judicial consequences, if necessary, afterwards (e.g. 1985-1987 US-Israeli cooperation in the Iran Contra affair; UK-US handling of Oleg Penkovski in the 1960s). Great interoperability at tactical / operational

level is best highlighted by the liaison between the US and the UK which has the benefit of better logistical support due to US resources and the unique advantage given by the use of the same language, similar security classifications, procedures and joint communication channels.

Intelligence cooperation is also about projected common foreign policy (Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones and David Stafford, 2000) or, in the US-UK case, about "shared many preconceptions about international issues" (Lander, 2004, p. 487). Countries cooperate in the international arena as they have common advantages regarding the protection of economic interests, establishing a new market, exerting political influence or mounting a military presence in a region, while countering other international players. Examples of intelligence agencies cooperation are the UK-US collaboration to topple the government of Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 because it affected British petroleum interests, while the US participated in the coup d'état over increased concern of Soviet influence, and a possible future military footprint in Iran. More generally, close intelligence liaison takes place also in forums like NATO or the UN where it facilitates the addressing of common threats and formulation of joint responses.

Crypto-diplomacy, or intelligence liaison substituting for non-existent diplomatic relations or supplementing them, is advantageous due to exchanging messages "through channels that can fairly easily be disavowed if unproductive" (Westerfield, 1996, p. 538). In cases when cooperation is exposed to public media, the government has plausible deniability of such liaison and subsequently it represents a lower risk of political responsibility. Additionally, intelligence officers can carry unsanctioned messages and establish cooperation mechanisms, while informally assessing the other party in regards to new proposals, which in case of failure can be refuted. Crypto-diplomacy had its highest point when this form of intelligence liaison facilitated the exchange of messages between the Soviet and US governments in 1962 that prevented nuclear conflict escalation. The use of crypto-diplomacy as a form a liaison has benefits, but one should consider the possible disadvantages of engaging in such secretive cooperation, especially when the inter-governmental "coordination of the channels is precarious" (Westerfield, 1996, p. 538).

Most successful cooperation between intelligence services is based on bilateral agreements compared with multilateral ones (e.g. Prüm Convention, Club of Berne, NATO Special Committee); or other forms of informal intelligence sharing. Bilateral cooperation 'is a daily occurrence for most intelligence services' and has the benefit of being more focused on the topics of interest (Hertzberger, 2007, p. 102). The information is exchanged directly between partners, on previously agreed terms, and with security risks usually lower than in other forms of cooperation. By comparison, multilateral agreements present several advantages as they have a multi-spectrum of "different areas of cooperation, different degrees of information sharing, different disciplines for partnering, and different specializations for exchanges", quantified in "systematic burden sharing, technology sharing, [and] shared access to specified intelligence assets" (Rudner, 2004, p. 194; Ibid.). However, the disadvantage of multilateral cooperation agreements is usually shared information, which is reduced to certain topics of interests and has a limited informative or operational value. Despite that, in some cases, this information is used as a trigger to develop future bilateral cooperation. The overall significance of these intelligence cooperation mechanisms is that they generate friendship at the individual level, confidence between partners with handling sensitive material, mutual respect, and understanding about partners' constraints and difficulties (Lander, 2004, p. 487).

## The risks in intelligence liaison

The risks in international intelligence liaison can overcome the benefits if they are not mitigated thorough understanding of the state-related variances between liaison partners: differences in foreign policy objectives and threat perception; disproportionalities in resources and power distribution; perception of adversarial intentions regarding cooperation; lack of mutual benefits; and penetration or exposure to a third party through unauthorised disclosure or information spillage. Other examples may include unintended purposes resulting from this cooperation, like the 1981 satellite imagery obtained from the CIA by Israel and used to target Iraq's Osirak reactor; and judicial objections to cooperation due to legislative restrictions or human rights violations of

a liaison partner. Although these can be present individually, in most cases they are jointly connected, creating a cumulus of factors threatening the international intelligence liaison.

To develop the first of these points, two countries' foreign policies cannot be fully congruent with each other. Referring to the UK's international relations policy, Lord Palmerston stated a basic principle in cooperation, affirming there are "no eternal allies" and "no perpetual enemies", suggesting the fluctuating character of international cooperation, allies, and changes in policy objectives, dependent on current realities (Johnson & Freyberg, 1997, p. 170). Historical perspective highlights this idea; in the 1950s, despite the long term and close cooperation between the UK and the US, the UK was reluctant to engage in provocative activities against the Soviets. Such an approach which could have been interpreted as a gap in their relations was, in fact, congruent with a different policy objective: to avoid challenging the USSR, which surprised the UK with the successful atomic bomb detonation in 1949 and the MIG-15 high altitude interceptor, whose capabilities were better than the Royal Air Force at that time. Additional differences in policies were apparent when "Britain failed to restrain America over Cuba, just as America had failed to restrain Britain from going into Suez" (Jeffreys-Jones & Stafford, 2000, p. 4). As a result, different foreign policies have negative effects in international cooperation, and the lack of 'combining finite resources' has consequences in firmly counteracting the adversary and its espionage or subversive actions (Johnson & Freyberg, 1997, p. 171).

Different policies resulted also in differences of threat perception, variable over time, which did not encourage in-depth liaison between traditional allies and triggered compartmentalised cooperation along with unilateral mitigation of threats. In a 2007 survey, several NATO countries had different perceptions of the Russia threat based on their proximity to Russia and regional conflicts involving it: "Poland, 36% cited Russia as their country's greatest future threat", while "nearly one-in-five Germans (18%) and Czechs (19%) also said Russia poses a threat" (Pew Research Center, 2007). After the WWII, the US perception of the Soviet military threat led not only to the use of Nazi intelligence officers hunted by the Israeli Institute for

Intelligence and Special Operations (Mossad) for war crimes but it limited the cooperation between US and Israel. The CIA emplaced extra protection measures to conceal their sources and avoid public embarrassment overuse of individuals with such "moral lapses" (Lichtblau, 2014). While some researchers might consider these decisions unethical, they are more likely an expression of suitable mitigation of threats based on limited resources and partners with needed expertise, a consequence of deficiencies in intelligence liaison.

Intelligence cooperation has shortcomings over differences in liaising countries' resources and political power. Most liaison activities involving powerful countries triggered one party dominating the relationship due to economic or military resources. An economically strong intelligence organisation is exemplified by the Central Intelligence Agency whose director "commands more resources than the UK Ministry of Defence, armed forces, aid budget, Foreign Office and intelligence agencies combined" (Lander, 2004, p. 486). One may argue that such differences need to be addressed either by establishing cooperation only between nations with equivalent resources or supporting the disfavoured nation to achieve a satisfactory level of resources needed in cooperation. The first case was roughly seen in the joint handling of Oleg Penkovski case when the US had better financial resources than the UK to stimulate and support his "more than 10,000 pages of material from over 100 exposed rolls of film"; the second case is exceptional but it happened recently with the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces which received expensive and interoperable equipment with US army (Scott, 1993, p. 138). However, a more realistic approach to a mutually beneficial liaison is a detailed cooperation agreement, stating clearly and specifically the duties of each liaison partner. SOE-NKVD relations demonstrated how cooperation can be negatively influenced by one party being limited in resources and favoured by a poorly made agreement. SOE had logistical difficulties supporting the "Pickaxe agents" and had conflicts with the Special Air Service (SAS) over their attempts to procure documents for the Soviet agents (Kitchen, 1997, p. 101). Despite these deficiencies, cooperation continued between the NKVD and the SOE in the UK's hope of becoming a "cornerstone of post-war cooperation between Russia

and the outside world" (Kitchen, 1997, p. 102). Shortcomings in intelligence cooperation due to resources are normal between countries, but large differences not negotiated in the cooperation treaty will lead to misunderstanding and exchange of blame and will compromise future cooperation activities.

Lack of comparable benefits, with one party gaining exceedingly more than the other, also affects liaison. In some cases, intelligence organisations entered partnerships without having a clear agenda and the agreement signed between them had faults either in stating clearly the responsibilities of each party, the timeline or the objectives of the partnership. The cooperation between the SOE and the NKVD in 1941-1945 exemplifies the case of troubled cooperation, tinted with limited information for the SOE: "in 1944 the NKVD agreed to supply some information on the location and strength of Bulgarian partisans and about German units in the country" (Kitchen, 1997, p. 105). While, eventually, the NKVD benefited more from such cooperation, also the SOE gained experience and understanding of the Soviets, which later would become their adversaries. Therefore, the international liaison is not always a fair "quid pro quo" form of exchanging benefits and has a sinusoidal progression where one party might obtain less than the other, or such benefits have an oscillatory character over time.

A high risk when conducting intelligence liaison is the recruitment of the liaison officer either by the host country or by an adversarial state. Recruitment by the host state poses significant risks, as the cooperation between the two states is going to be affected in several ways, including political, economic and military. An example of a high profile liaison officer recruited by an adversarial nations includes Larry Wu-tai Chin, recruited in 1944 when he was working in China for the US Army Liaison Office, and had "near 40-year espionage career" in favour of China until his exposure in 1985 (Eftimiades, 1993, p. 38). A more recent case led in 2020 to the arrest of a Ukrainian Major General working in the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) for the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Interestingly, his recruitment took place around 2014 when he acted in a liaison capacity, in the SBU-FSB interagency cooperation. Although in the context of a host friendly nation other ways than recruiting the partner's liaison officer are

recommended, not every intelligence agency abides by this. Jonathan Pollard's recruitment in 1984 by the Israeli military intelligence unit LAKAM led to a tense political relationship between US and Israel, triggered limits in intelligence liaison between the two countries, and led to the official disbandment of LAKAM in 1986. In another case, the US-UK liaison officer Harold "Kim" Philby's recruitment by the KGB allowed the Soviets to have access to targeting operations against them including names of operatives and methods used. This penetration also disrupted "a joint SIS-CIA infiltration operation in Albania, thereby leading to the death of at least 300 individuals" (Lefebvre, 2003: 535). In consequence, "every liaison relationship is laced with suspicion" of being penetrated by a hostile intelligence service, or viewed with adversarial intentions regarding cooperation, which restrains intelligence services from full cooperation (Johnson & Freyberg, 1997, p. 171).

Perception of adversarial intentions regarding intelligence cooperation takes place between organisations which were confrontational over some time or because of historical ties. At the end of the Cold War, some Eastern European intelligence services were engaged in cooperation with Western services which they fought against for more than 40 years. Even though politically the states made the necessary steps toward cooperation, as "intelligence relationship is part of a wider political relationship and depends in good measure on that wider context", intelligence agencies developed limited cooperation (Lander, 2004, p. 486). The dangers coming from such cooperation is an increased risk for disinformation or manipulation of the other party, under the appearance of bona fides.

Intelligence liaison between two countries' intelligence services is more difficult when the cultures are different between the two, presenting the danger of misconception, prejudice and cultural clashes. Evelyne R. Hertzberger (2007) identified problems in intelligence cooperation when "building of trust is more difficult if a language barrier is in place" and the intelligence sharing declined when the officers were not "of the same or similar cultures" (Hertzberger, 2007, p. 105; Ibid.). In SOE-NKVD cooperation the Russians were considered "peasants", "primitive" and with a "dullness and stupidity of expression"

(Aldrich, 1998, p. 332; Ibid.; Ibid.). These perceptions about the Russians exposed the risk of intelligence liaison failure due to cultural misconceptions.

In internationally intelligence liaison a distinct danger nowadays is the legal aspect. Western countries engage in peacekeeping operations and support with intelligence the host country intelligence service, which can have questionable methods of collecting information. These are facilitated by legislative voids like in Afghanistan, where the intelligence services supported by the international community are known to use torture as a wide practice, official explanation being as "caused by individuals but not national policy" (Smith, 2017). Other circumstances include states which prefer to benefit from using partners to perform certain questionable intelligence-related activities to circumvent international and domestic laws to make their actions' accountability equivocal. Such illegal activities are usually directed against individuals considered terrorists and these activities are known to have taken place when CIA used "black sites" between 2002 and 2008 in countries like Afghanistan or Thailand (Siems, 2017).

Other risks in liaison include Western countries having judicial objections to sharing intelligence products outside national borders because of internal legislation or the receiving country's legal system which allows (in certain conditions) third parties access to intelligence obtained from a partner. These third-party entities are not part of the cooperation agreement and present the risk of compromising confidential sources involved. The 2006 report on the Canadian case of Nicholas Ribic charged with taking hostage four UN peacekeepers exemplifies the matter when a private citizen, upon being offered a fair trial was granted access to classified materials, some of them received from foreign intelligence services. Some countries overcame this risk by caveating the shared intelligence as to be used only for information purposes or triggering investigative leads without having indicting valence. In consequence, sharing intelligence which can be disclosed to unauthorised third parties due to countries' legal systems will trigger less sharing, with consequences in mitigating efficiently a common threat.

## Conclusion

International intelligence liaison is a double-edged matter, and the important thing is how the risks and the benefits are approached. The risks will always be present in the form of disinformation, different foreign policy, cultural and legal implications, but since these are insurmountable, how the liaison partners are addressing them makes the difference between successful and failed cooperation. Deception in liaison can be both informative and risky, as a recruited liaison officer by an adversary third party is a danger to the intelligence service, but also, if known, a communication channel. The important elements in international intelligence liaison are communication between partners to enhance the benefits, and counterintelligence protection programs to transform the risks into opportunities. While a proper balance between the two is highly unlikely, the existence of more benefits over risks makes international intelligence liaison a solution for effectively addressing the uncertainties of the current and future threats.

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