

# RESEARCH SHORT

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IMAGE FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

## Why Define Intelligence?

Frederic Baron

For more than a half-century, government leaders, intelligence practitioners, and scholars have sought to define and redefine intelligence in the national security sense. The effectiveness of the US Intelligence Community (IC), without consensus on this basic term, begs the question: Does defining intelligence matter? The answer is an emphatic yes. Defining intelligence is critical for the IC and the nascent intelligence studies discipline. Achieving agreement on what intelligence is would better focus IC missions, authorities, resources, and oversight. Moreover, understanding what it should be is essential to envisioning and achieving an efficacious future intelligence enterprise to enable sound decisions in a rapidly changing world.

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## The Challenge of Defining Intelligence

Historian Michael Warner observes that “smart and well-meaning people differ over the very definition of intelligence.”<sup>1</sup> Authors of academic and other nonfiction volumes and articles about intelligence, therefore, nearly always explain what they mean by the term. While there are official and scholarly definitions, they vary considerably and have changed over time. Listing and analyzing those various definitions could fill a book, but their limitations and the lack of consensus are well-known.

Looking to the IC for a definition of its own work is one place to start. The website of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) posits that intelligence is certain “information,”<sup>2</sup> a position that is neither universally accepted nor particularly clear. That definition is derived, but different, from definitions of “national intelligence” and its component “foreign intelligence” that are included in the National Security Act of 1947. Although both of these definitions include the term “intelligence,” that term is not defined.<sup>3</sup>

Intelligence scholars and both current and former practitioners have devoted considerable effort to answering the question, “What is intelligence?”<sup>4</sup> They have proposed not only definitions, but also explicit and intentional redefinitions of intelligence.<sup>5</sup> Notable examples include: the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence’s 1992 Working Group on Intelligence Reform, featuring papers by Jennifer Sims and Abram Shulsky; a 2005 conference convened by the Assistant DNI for Policy and Strategy and RAND that also brought together practitioners and academics;<sup>6</sup> the resultant report and book, *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates*;<sup>7</sup> and a 2023 International Studies Association workshop on defining intelligence and its place in the international relations literature.

The range of definitions of intelligence proposed by scholars, practitioners, and policies over the years, in the above and many other sources, contains overlapping or even contradictory concepts. These include:

- Espionage (now called human intelligence, or HUMINT), a definition that sometimes adds other forms of intelligence collection or includes all five collection disciplines (HUMINT, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, measurement and signals intelligence, and open-source intelligence).
- The activities of organizations within the Intelligence Community, including intelligence analysis and collection and sometimes covert action or influence operations.
- Information (or a term that includes information), or a subset of information relating to the military or various ideas of national security.
- Secrets or information from all sources.

“Intelligence is information gathered within or outside the US that involves threats to our nation, its people, property, or interests; development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction; and any other matter bearing on the US national or homeland security.”

– ODNI, “What Is Intelligence?”

- Knowledge of facts.
- Analysis, including insights.
- Predictions, warnings of threats, and, for some, opportunities.
- Products, usually written but also briefings.
- Relationships with customers, drawing on knowledge that supports policies or is independent of policies and “speaks truth to power.”
- Communication that provides decision advantage for national security policymakers or operational advantage for military and other operators.

Adding to the muddle is the increasingly relevant acknowledgement that intelligence exists outside the IC and outside the government. Some scholars have responded by arguing that the intelligence activities sponsored by sovereign powers differ not just in degree, but in kind, from (lawful) intelligence undertaken by private or corporate entities.<sup>8</sup>

Although decades of scholarship have advanced the discussion of intelligence, they have not yielded an effective, unifying concept. “None of the definitions that I have seen work,” wrote the late David Kahn. “It is like the term ‘news.’ Though all but impossible to define, every journalist knows what it is....”<sup>9</sup> In fact, as Stephen Marrin observed in 2016, there is, as of yet, no consensus on the definition or purpose of intelligence.<sup>10</sup> What a CIA officer, under the pseudonym Martin Bimfort, wrote in a 1956 volume of *Studies in Intelligence* remains true today: “Definitions carefully formulated by intelligence experts do exist, but all seem deficient in one respect or another; the concept remains as sprawling and thorny as a briar patch.”<sup>11</sup>

## Why Define Intelligence?

Philip Davies notes that, “It is entirely possible that by asking ‘What is intelligence?’ we may be barking up the wrong intellectual tree.”<sup>12</sup> Why does the described lack of clarity and consensus on the meaning of intelligence matter? Potential gains from developing a better understanding, and perhaps even a clearer definition, of intelligence would extend across a broad range of intelligence activities and beyond. Here are some to consider:

### **Mission Focus**

The effectiveness of US intelligence is often said to rest on IC professionals’ mission focus. So, what is their mission? According to the ODNI, “The US Intelligence Community provides

**Figure 1.** Word cloud from A New Quantitative Approach to an Old Question



Source: *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (September 2023).

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timely, rigorous, apolitical, and insightful intelligence and support to inform national security decisions and protect our Nation and its interests.”<sup>13</sup> Mission is first among the Principles of Professional Ethics for the Intelligence Community, along with aspects one might more readily consider ethics, such as truth, lawfulness, and integrity.<sup>14</sup> If the mission is to provide intelligence and support (within some bounds and purposes), we need to understand what intelligence is—*and what it is not*—to best focus efforts and resources. Simply put, better defining intelligence would improve the IC’s mission focus and effectiveness, now and in the future.

### ***Authorities and Oversight***

The laws, executive orders, regulations, and policies relating to intelligence grant explicit authorities for a range of activities. Sometimes their intention is to limit activities, particularly to protect privacy and civil liberties. An agreed upon understanding of intelligence would clarify IC authorities and help build public understanding and trust of the IC.

The National Security Act of 1947, as amended, stipulates that, “The President shall ensure that the Congressional intelligence committees are kept fully and currently informed of the intelligence activities of the United States, including any significant anticipated intelligence activity as required by this title.”<sup>15</sup> This and other oversight mandates rely on an understanding of “intelligence activities.” The oversight question becomes thornier if one considers concepts of intelligence that are not limited to the government, especially with the possibility of the government gaining the results of such nongovernmental intelligence activities.

### ***Collaboration and Deconfliction***

In his 1956 *Studies in Intelligence* article, Martin Bimfort observed that, “[M]isunderstandings within and without the Intelligence Community often result from incompatible understandings of the meaning of the word *intelligence*. Moreover, the assignment and coordination of functions, responsibilities, and relationships among the members of the Community must rest upon an agreed interpretation of this word in the laws and directives which govern our work.”<sup>16</sup>

Executive Order 12333, which provides authorities to many intelligence agencies, is of little help in bounding the concept. The document broadly defines intelligence activities as “all activities that agencies within the Intelligence Community are authorized to conduct pursuant to this Order.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, anything any intelligence agency or element can legally do is within the scope of intelligence activities—even if those same activities are done by entities outside the IC as well.

Indeed, the National Security Act and modern practice reflect an acceptance that there is government intelligence—including departmental intelligence and law enforcement intelligence—that is not national intelligence. Thus, the authorities question also arises with respect to the prerogatives of other US Government departments and agencies. A better understanding of what intelligence is, and is not, could improve understanding and reduce duplication and friction within the US Government.

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## ***Bounding Customer Expectations***

Intelligence is often defined as information or knowledge, or as a subset of these. The IC often addresses questions posed by policy and operational customers, from the President to the foxhole. Clarity on the role of intelligence could help the IC manage customer expectations. As Wilhelm Agrell put it, “When everything is intelligence—nothing is intelligence.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, should the IC be the verified, classified “Wikipedia” for all questions from the National Security Council and its staff and agencies, providing even information readily available online or from other agencies or foreign partners?

Although many definitions of intelligence include information, the IC has neither the resources nor the expertise to be the source of any and all information. Defining intelligence might help the IC fend off inquiries that are not intelligence, questions that should be directed elsewhere. Our concept of national security is expansive and expanding, as reflected in the most recent *National Security Strategy* and *National Intelligence Strategy*. Defining what intelligence is—and what it is not—may help to scope questions in ways that make the intelligence mission more feasible by bounding it.

## ***Enabling Partnerships***

National security intelligence is not something the IC can do effectively on its own; it relies on other government agencies, foreign counterparts, and the private sector. The diversity of uses and meanings for the word intelligence—for example, in law enforcement intelligence or business intelligence (now often called competitive intelligence)—may impede effective partnerships. Philip Davies observed that “profound differences emerge within two closely related and closely integrated intelligence communities, which also share a common language and political culture. If Britain and the United States differ so widely and fundamentally, what about systems that are less cognate?”<sup>19</sup>

Better defining intelligence should enable the IC to partner more effectively at home—and abroad. This potential for greater cooperation suggests it will be important to engage with our partners, and with their usages and understandings of intelligence, as we consider definitions.

## ***Scholarship***

At least since Sherman Kent published *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* in 1949, there have been efforts to develop intelligence as a field of academic scholarship. Kent articulated this idea most clearly in a 1955 article (publicly released in 1993) on “The Need for an Intelligence Literature.” He stressed that, “In most respects the intelligence calling has come of age,” but then asserted that, “[Y]ou are unlikely to have a robust and growing discipline without” a literature.<sup>20</sup> As Peter Gill noted during the 2005 ODNI/RAND conference, “A good theory of *intelligence* should, by definition, be useful for *intelligence*.”<sup>21</sup> Michael Warner cautioned, however, that deriving a theory requires first defining intelligence.<sup>22</sup>

Since Kent’s writings, academic study and literature on intelligence has grown considerably, and the focus has broadened beyond merely study that would benefit the IC.<sup>23</sup> A decade ago, Tobias

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Vogt wrote an article that attempts to answer the question of whether intelligence studies warrant inclusion as a discipline within higher education. Among the criteria from Armin Krishnan that Vogt applies are, “a particular object of research” and “specific terminologies or a specific technical language adjusted to their research object.” Thus, an understanding of the term intelligence is essential to the development of intelligence studies as an academic discipline. Better defining intelligence would certainly advance this cause, especially as Vogt’s broad definition is unlikely to achieve broad consensus. He posits that, “In the case of intelligence studies, ‘intelligence’ is the object of research. This may include the term ‘information,’ but in the public and private sectors, information and intelligence are often used interchangeably.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Education and Training***

If intelligence is a profession, or even a set of professions as Bo Miller has recently argued, then surely education and training are needed to advance the requisite knowledge and skills.<sup>25</sup> My own institution, National Intelligence University, and a growing number of other institutions of higher learning in the United States, UK, and elsewhere offer education on intelligence. IC agencies and elements and nongovernment entities also provide training aimed at improving the effectiveness of intelligence professionals or those who aspire to become intelligence professionals. Getting the education and training right surely requires an understanding of what intelligence is and whether it is one or more than one profession. One arguably needs an anticipatory or even normative definition for this purpose: What will intelligence be, or what should it be in the future?

### ***Conceiving the Future Intelligence Enterprise***

The future is arguably the most important reason to seek greater understanding and consensus on the meaning of intelligence. A substantial and growing literature—mostly from current or former intelligence practitioners, but also from academics—calls for reform, reinvention, revolution, or transformation of the IC. Yet, as the 2005 ODNI/RAND conference concluded:

[E]ven among those who might agree on the need for intelligence reform or “revolutionary change,” it is difficult to agree on a course or even courses of action. While many observers can list current problems, the divergence of their views over the very essence of intelligence hampers agreement on what is essentially wrong, how it can be changed, and whether changing it will make any significant difference in national security outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

To design and develop the future intelligence enterprise, we need to know what purpose(s), role(s), and customers intelligence should serve. This will require overcoming the many definitions of intelligence that are based on current IC activities, sources and methods, organizations, and products, because these may constrain or even impede developing an intelligence enterprise for the future global environment. In addition, we must eschew definitions that are too broad, like the common assertions that intelligence is information or knowledge, as they do not differentiate national security intelligence.



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Informing the development of the future intelligence enterprise requires understanding what national security intelligence is, including how it has changed over time, and then going further—to consider potential futures. We will need to understand how our mission will evolve, as well as the external context, to perform our future mission well.

This purpose, more than any other, requires practitioners and scholars to observe changes in the global security environment, in the IC itself, among our customers and their missions, in new and emerging technologies and organizational constructs—and what capabilities they may enable—and in society as a whole. Considering intelligence in other nations and by nonstate actors would be beneficial, if only to assess what we have in common and what distinguishes the US IC. Beyond understanding what intelligence has been and will become, we need to consider what intelligence could—or should—be in the future.

## Revisiting First Principles to Elevate Intelligence

In his seminal article advocating for the development of an intelligence literature,<sup>27</sup> Sherman Kent articulated three important aspects:

1. “[T]he literature I have in mind will deal with first principles. A portion of it will certainly have to deal with the fundamental problem of what we are trying to do.”
2. Kent expected “a systematic literature of intelligence” to include “a definition of terms.” At the same time, he noted that, “Words which stand for complicated concepts cannot be defined by a dictionary.”
3. Kent hoped the intelligence literature would be an “elevated debate.”

The IC, the intelligence profession(s), and intelligence scholarship have advanced immeasurably in the half-century since Kent wrote those words. We are at an important time to return to a discussion of first principles and, yes, definitions, so we can build on that progress and develop an intelligence enterprise for the next half-century. Please join us in an elevated debate on defining—or redefining—national security intelligence for the future.

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If you have comments, questions, or suggestions for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at [NIIPress@niu.odni.gov](mailto:NIIPress@niu.odni.gov).

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## Endnotes

- 1 Michael Warner, “Wanted: A Definition of ‘Intelligence’,” in *Secret Intelligence*, ed. Christopher Andrews, Richard J. Aldrich, and Wesley K. Wark (London: Routledge, 2019), 4-12.
- 2 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “What Is Intelligence?” accessed December 2023. <https://www.odni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence>.
- 3 US Congress, National Security Act of 1947, U.S. Statutes at Large 496 (1947), as amended through Public Law 118–31, December 22, 2023, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-1493/pdf/COMPS-1493.pdf>.
- 4 Readers interested in the range of definitions would be well-served by starting with Jennifer Sims and Abram Shulsky’s divergent essays in *U.S. Intelligence at the Crossroads: Agendas for Reform*, ed. Roy Godson, Ernest R. May, and Gary Schmitt (Williamsport, MD: Brassey’s, 1995); Giangiuseppe Pili, “Toward a Philosophical Definition of Intelligence,” *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public* 21, no. 2 (2019); Milton Diaz “Forming a Definitional Framework for ‘Intelligence’,” *American Intelligence Journal* 29, no. 1 (2011); and Andrew Macpherson and Glenn Hastedt, “A New Quantitative Approach to an Old Question,” *Studies in Intelligence* 67, no. 3 (2023).
- 5 Examples of intentional redefinitions of intelligence include Alan Breakspear, “A New Definition of Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 5 (2013): 678-93; and James Cox, “A Fundamental Re-Conceptualization of Intelligence: Cognitive Activity and the Pursuit of Advantage,” *Intelligence and National Security* 37, no. 2 (2021): 197-215.
- 6 Gregory F. Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence: Workshop Report* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf\\_proceedings/CF219.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF219.html).
- 7 Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin, and Mark Phythian, *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
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- 10 Stephen Marrin, “Improving Intelligence Studies as an Academic Discipline,” *Intelligence and National Security* 31, no. 22 (2014): 266-79.
- 11 Martin Bimfort, “A Definition of Intelligence,” *Studies in Intelligence* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1956), declassified 18 September 1995.
- 12 Philip H.J. Davies, “Ideas of Intelligence: Divergent National Concepts and Institutions,” *Harvard International Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 62–66.
- 13 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *2023 National Intelligence Strategy*, released 10 August 2023.
- 14 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Principles of Professional Ethics for the IC,” in *2023 National Intelligence Strategy*, released 10 August 2023.
- 15 US Congress, National Security Act of 1947.
- 16 Bimfort, “A Definition of Intelligence.”
- 17 White House, Executive Order 12333, “United States Intelligence Activities,” as amended by Executive Orders 13284 (2003), 13355 (2004) and 13470 (2008), <https://dpcl.dod.mil/Portals/49/Documents/Civil/eo-12333-2008.pdf>.
- 18 Wilhelm Agrell, “When Everything Is Intelligence—Nothing Is Intelligence,” *The Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis Occasional Papers* 1, no. 4 (2002).
- 19 Philip Davies, “Ideas of Intelligence: Divergent National Concepts and Institutions,” in *Secret Intelligence*, ed. Christopher Andrews, Richard J. Aldrich, and Wesley K. Wark (London: Routledge, 2019), 13-20.
- 20 Sherman Kent, “The Need for an Intelligence Literature,” *Studies in Intelligence* 1, no. 1 (1955): 1-11.
- 21 Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence*.
- 22 Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence*.
- 23 See, for example, Glenn P. Hastedt, *Controlling Intelligence* (New York: Frank Cass, 1991) and Hager Ben Jaffell and Sebastian Larsson, *Problematising Intelligence Studies: Towards a New Research Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2022).



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