

Do Intelligence Services dictate Geopolitics or respond to it?

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“Geopolitics” a word used to describe how geography affects politics on a global scale.

“Intelligence” is a word used to describe information that cannot be found overtly or as once put to me: “it is information that Ministers do not want to hear”.

“Service” is a word used to describe an organisation that does work of use to a client.

These definitions are important for today’s debate. In the context of this talk I will try and address the following question: How far do Intelligence Services dictate the geopolitical agenda and how much do they respond to it?

So, in the theory of the definitions, an intelligence service is doing work of use for a government. That implies it does not dictate the agenda but rather responds to requirements placed upon it by its political masters who are, in effect, its clients. Intelligence requirements undoubtedly change in nature depending on the nature of the government or politician who have control over the service. A democracy will have a system of control and oversight to ensure that the work of an intelligence service is acting in accordance with the law and in the national interest. But the national interest changes if the regime is authoritarian, autocratic or to use the big word of this year’s politics: “populist”. Another theme of our age is the reach and influence of social media and the impact of instant news with photographs. Thus, the impact of an event that might be tactical in nature can end up having a strategic effect. An intelligence service can, therefore, impact geopolitics.

However, before we look at some of this year’s events, we should consider the nature of the Intelligence Services we are talking about. Of the nearly 200 countries in the world only a handful have a global capability in the traditional sense of having a requirement and an ability to conduct operations across the world. The cyber world is, of course, different as one individual can have a global impact.

Why do intelligence services exist? Spying is allegedly the world’s second oldest profession as leaders through history sought to gain advantage over their opponents by out-thinking them and winning a war. There is a clear distinction between wartime and peacetime intelligence. Wartime intelligence is about ensuring victory. Peace time intelligence is about avoiding war and maintaining strategic advantage (which in itself may be a cause of further war).

But if we set aside the global players, for a while, we need to look at the needs of the smaller countries such as Slovakia and Czechia whose intelligence requirements will look different to the truly global players but who, because of regional and global alliances, still have a role to play at the world level. However, taking geopolitics at his basic meaning of “geography politics” most intelligence services will be looking at their neighbours and not the other side of the world. Until, that is, the other side of the world come to them; be it migrants from the Sahel or investors from China. The shrinking of geography caused by modern technology and transport means that every state needs some sort of global outlook. There is a strong role for intelligence analysis to inform government decisions.

Three years ago, no-one would have predicted the murder of a British citizen following the attempted poisoning of a pardoned Russian ex spy on the streets of Salisbury, nor the dismembering of a Saudi journalist in an Istanbul consulate. Were the murders the actions of rogue services or the result of clear orders from political masters? We may never know the truth but what we do know is that both events have had geo-political consequences. Even if the actions were committed by rogue elements of intelligence services they were acting in what they thought was in the interest of the governments they serve.

The impact of Intelligence Services on Geopolitics is dependent on the legal and oversight framework in which they operate, the degree of global reach they exercise, the state's own view of its geo-political importance and the balance of power of a state against its real or perceived rivals.

So let us take a look at those countries who have global aspirations, their intelligence services and how they impact on Geo-politics.

RUSSIA

The UK Head of the Army, recently said that Russia posed a bigger threat to the UK than ISIS. A state threat bigger than a terrorist threat. Russia's intelligence services are large, unreformed, aggressive and paranoid. They consistently mirror image, assuming that what they do to other people is what is being done to them. Geo-politically Russia's stance is one of wanting to be recognised as a Global Power. Putin has been consistent in his view that the break up of the Soviet Union was a humiliation that was exploited by the West. While the West talked of peace dividends and partnership, the expansion of the EU and NATO has made Russia, rightly or wrongly, appear threatened. This, though, is not factually based but rather emotional. Geopolitical emotions are difficult to read. The behaviours of Intelligence Services reflect those emotions. The externally aggressive behaviour of the GU, the continued internally aggressive surveillance of Western diplomats in Moscow by the FSB and the increased numbers of SVR officers overseas all indicate that Russia is asserting its great power credentials, even if the economy is in trouble. Russia's government is adept at using business, diplomacy, politics and intelligence in a combined way. Their activities in cyber space merely confirm that they have the ability and desire to influence global events for the glory of the Motherland. Whereas an impartial observer might argue that their efforts are a huge waste of undoubted talented human capital who would be better placed working for economic collaboration. In many ways the Russia of the last 25 years has been the flag bearer of nationalist populism that has now taken root across the world. Their attempts to undermine the EU, influence US elections, re-assert near neighbour control are conducted through the prism of a political system rooted in Putin's KGB past.

CHINA

Knowledge is everything. China too has had a resurgence of nationalist rhetoric but combined with an economic growth and increased military spend that is unrivalled in recent decades. At a conference I was at last year a Chinese businessman look around the room, of mainly white Western neo-liberals, and said that for thousands of years China led the world.

The last few centuries had seen the West at the forefront but rather than being a collection of nation states, China was a civilisation and that China was now back as the leading player in global politics. The thoughts of XI Xiping now enshrined in the constitution and the longer-term view that a one-party state can afford to take now put China at a planning advantage. Unhampered by the disruption of regular electoral cycles that blind democratic governments from a long term view, the Chinese have recognised two important factors that are worth watching. The first is the need for knowledge. In the last seventy years the West has smugly said that the Chinese are imitators not innovators. They have a strong reputation for industrial espionage and disrespecting international rules around intellectual property. While this thirst for knowledge, be it stolen, purchased, or imitated will continue apace the Chinese have also begun to innovate. The discoverers of gunpowder have re-found their talent for invention. They are investing in super computers and looking to change the negative impression of 'made in China'. The Chinese intelligence services have long been part of the state's desire for economic knowledge acquisition. They have not taken much interest in geopolitics outside the Asian region unless it has an economic benefit such as the thirst for African natural resources. The increased GDP has led to increased spending on defence and intelligence and has led to a stronger reassertion of power in the South China Sea. The Chinese now pose a longer term strategic geo-political threat to the West than hitherto. The Belt and Road initiative, the 16 + 1 Eastern Europe economic partnership sowing discord in Europe, and the continued exploitation of Africa all make China geopolitically relevant. Like Russia their investment in Cyber capability and make Chinese intelligence services of global significance.

USA

For all his many faults, President Trump has recognised that China poses such a threat. The trade war that he has launched has many motivations but the one that strikes a chord is the decline of the US steel industry because of cheap Chinese imports. If you assess that, in some time in the future, the US might face a conventional war again and that there is a high chance that China might be the adversary how sensible is it that your armaments industry relies heavily on imported Chinese steel. This is why Trump used his national security justification for the imposition of tariffs. Now the trade war has spread beyond the issue of national security to the genuinely unfair practices that China uses in its trade with the rest of the world. Its competitiveness is rooted in cheap labour and low material and transport cost. How can US (or European) companies compete when the market is not fair. Unfortunately, however logical Trump's thinking might be his behaviour and bully boy tactics do not lead to sensible negotiated outcomes. The long-term impact of the trade war is yet to be fully understood but like many issues there are bound to be unforeseen, unintended consequences both domestically in the US and internationally. The intelligence services in the US have had a rough time with the administration. The Russian inquiry, the sacking of the heads of the FBI and CIA, and Trump's disdain for intelligence product mean that it is possible that the US intelligence community is currently having less influence on Presidential driven policy than at any time in recent years. The Mueller inquiry is a pivotal geopolitical event. It could lead to a Presidential impeachment and if it proves Russian involvement in election manipulation will place the US/Russia relations back to the darkest days of the cold war. The withdrawal from the INF treaty is another example of Trump making a logical decision that

has intelligence implications. Intelligence almost certainly formed the backdrop of the assessment that the Russians were ignoring the terms of the treaty and will now play a part in understanding Russian capability and intent. In short, the need for intelligence to inform policy remains as high now as it ever as.

MIDDLE EAST – IRAN AND ISRAEL

The seeming insoluble stalemate in Syria and the Middle East where thousands of years of historical animosity are replayed in graphic horror on a daily basis shows that however brilliant the global intelligence services think they are they cannot shape that knowledge in a way that allows their political masters to solve a crisis. I do not want to go into detail here other than to note that fake news, cyber capability, historical myths, and blind intolerance all make for perpetual instability and the continued threat of mass migration which may only be exacerbated by climate change. The intelligence service of Iran and Israel both have the capability to be destructive and to perpetuate animosity through their action that have impact well beyond the region.

REST OF WORLD MINUS EUROPE

I do not want to do a tour of the whole world but before moving on to Europe I should note the rise of Asia beyond China as a geopolitical force but without the intelligence services to match while noting North Korea has a strong cyber capability. The population growth in Africa poses a geopolitical challenge to Europe to the north but as Cameroon and Libya show is a continent riven with internal contradictions that, perhaps, only influence us if there is increased mass migration or lack of access to precious metals.

EUROPE

I have not mentioned the B word of BREXIT. Geopolitically huge in its impact but one that also highlights in its debate the disparate and disjointed nature of the European Intelligence and Security community. In essence only two countries in Europe have a truly global political requirement matched by a global capability: Britain and France. Britain's departure from the European table will impact on security co-operation but not as dramatically as many fear as so much co-operation is at a bilateral level. But BREXIT is perhaps not the biggest crisis or issue that Europe faces. The Greek crisis highlighted the North South split, which is perhaps better highlighted today by Italy (arguably a bigger crisis than BREXIT) and increasingly there is an East West divide. The countries of Eastern Europe have an increasingly sceptical view of Brussels imposed rules. In many ways the issues of sovereignty are the same that Britain faced. What does this mean for intelligence services? The issues that are at stake – the single currency and immigration are not traditional intelligence requirements for small country services, except where they impact on organised crime. What is shown is that Europe, with or without Britain, is poorly placed to manage the threats from Russia and China, nor from Trump's desire for the US to contribute less to European defence. Macron's call for a European army is a reflection of the concern that individual countries on their own are not able to provide the reassurance, deterrence or defensive capability that the

continent requires. Cultural differences in intelligence practices, linguistic difficulties, and different perceptions of Europe's and its constituent countries place in the world make for a fractured intelligence and security picture.

CONCLUSION

This has been a canter through global geo-politics and I conclude that the theory of definition holds true. Intelligence Services are services that serve their countries. They do not, alone, shape geo-politics but rather respond to their political masters' practice of it. Europe needs a more coherent response if it is to face the challenges of the future from the major intelligence and military powers.