

Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

Written by Marcus Wethered

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MARCUS WETHERED, AUG 8 2014

The application of International Relations (IR) theories to Intelligence Studies (IS) has been limited, especially on the subject of intelligence cooperation.[1] The lack of focus on intelligence liaison exposes a large gap in IR theory considering how symbolic cooperation is to the debate over what drives the behaviour of states. The end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11 have increased the level of international intelligence cooperation.[2] These events, along with others such as the recent Snowden revelations that the US intelligence agencies have been spying on some of their allies, have brought intelligence cooperation into public and academic debate.[3] Due to its increase in depth, breadth and exposure, scholars are beginning to apply theories to explain why intelligence cooperation occurs.

Richelson defines 'intelligence cooperation' to mean 'arrangements by a government to exchange intelligence with a foreign government or permit another nation to establish intelligence facilities on one's territory' (in order to yield potential benefits).[4] Intelligence cooperation has been subconsciously accepted amongst most IS scholars to be one of the last unchallenged realms of Realism in IR. Whichever variant of Realism (whether 'Classical', 'Neo,' 'Structural,' or 'Critical') is selected,[5] intelligence liaison is explained in basic Realist terms by the maxim 'knowledge is power'. Realists argue that states cooperate with other states in order to fulfill their self-interest in augmenting their power and overcoming threats to their survival.[6]

The first section of this essay will show how Realism holds a largely unchallenged and subconscious dominance in the academic literature on the subject of intelligence cooperation. The following sections will then explain how Liberal-Institutionalist theory and Constructivist theory can be used to better explain certain aspects of the existence of intelligence liaison. Due to its novel approach to the subject matter, much of this essay will be focused on how Constructivist theory develops upon the explanatory powers of Liberal and Realist inputs. Finally, this essay will conclude that Realism alone does not account for intelligence cooperation; instead we should combine Realism with Liberal-Institutionalist and Constructivist theories in order to best explain why intelligence cooperation occurs between states.

Literature Review

Intelligence cooperation is a presence in IR that remains 'largely under-studied and substantially under-theorized'.[7] The majority of the academic literature on intelligence cooperation does not explicitly mention theoretical approaches to the subject, however the literatures holds a strong Realist line that almost implies an assumption that intelligence cooperation is a solely Realist game. The literature presents the intelligence arena to be one of a permanent war, governed by a zero-sum calculus of risk and loss against opponents.[8] For example, Walsh's book on intelligence sharing is embedded in Realist language and terminology, as he emphasizes the anarchical context of cooperation.[9] In that respect, Walsh's view is symbolic of the Realist understanding that interprets intelligence cooperation to be conducted in the context of a Hobbesian view of anarchy, in which states are enemies in a constant war with one another, rather than perhaps a Lockean view of anarchy in which states are rivals who may help each other for mutual advantage.[10] The works of Walsh, Richelson, Lefebvre, Phythian, Gill, and Lander take an unspoken Realist approach to the topic of intelligence cooperation, regardless of whether or not they are Realists on the whole. We can gather their Realist stance from the language and concepts that they have used which depicts the

Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

Written by Marcus Wethered

game of intelligence cooperation to be one of 'zero-sum' relative gains and 'Prisoner's Dilemmas' as to how to maximise self-interests.[11]

It seems to be the automatic predisposition in the literature that IS exists in a vacuum, free from IR theory; however this anti-theoretical dogma is very much a theory in itself.[12] Cox famously said that 'theory is always for some purpose,'[13] and when theory is an unspoken assumption, it has achieved its purpose. Whether conscious or subconscious, it is a Realist agenda to class the realm of IS to be exclusively about 'practical arrangements' and so is detached from the rest of IR, as Aldrich does in marking intelligence cooperation as 'disconnected from the high politics of foreign policy and strategy.'[14] The fact that this Realist agenda has been accepted by much of the academic literature (and by writers who have been active in the practice of intelligence, such as Lander) suggests that Realism has achieved its purpose, because this excuses and justifies the pursuit of self-interest with a disregard for humanitarian concerns. This Realist discourse of self-interest, relative gains, and statist survival is encapsulated by this passage from Pythian:

'If we were to ask why states regard intelligence as being necessary, we could answer that intelligence is the agency through which states seek to protect or extend their relative advantage'.[15]

Moreover, in the wider context of IR, the notion that intelligence remains an arena governed solely by the self-interest of states, indicates that there is more Realism in IR than meets the eye, as self-interest in IR is hidden in the shadows of secret intelligence.

However, scholars are beginning to recognise the unipolarity of theory that underpins the debate over what drives intelligence cooperation, and so other theories are starting to appear in the literature. Aldrich's article on 'Dangerous Liaisons,' identifies that there are two schools of thought on this subject, Realism and Liberal-Institutionalism.[16] Since then, Svendsen and Munton have added a Constructivist input to the debate.[17] Although most academics inexplicitly toe the Realist line, those that instead acknowledge the Liberal and Realist schools of thought, such as Aldrich, seem to present the choice as one of 'either-or'; however, Svendsen unstitches this dichotomy to argue that we have to combine theories in order to explain intelligence liaison and its dynamics more fully.[18]

Liberal-Institutionalist Theory

Realism fails to account for elements of intelligence cooperation that clearly have humanitarian motives or mutual interests at heart, as these motives can be more easily identified as Liberal features of IS. Johnson argues that affluent and militarily secure states have displayed a 'willingness to move beyond narrow Realist pursuits to define their interests more broadly... in terms of international humanitarian objectives.'[19] We can see obvious examples of this, which cannot be easily explained by Realists as self-interest, such as the use of intelligence sharing to provide evidence for international judicial proceedings against war criminals.[20] Johnson gives the example of when US satellites detected the mass graves of Bosnians slaughtered by Serbian paramilitary troops in the 1990's.[21] Not only does this example represent an anti-Realist interest in humanitarianism, but it also shows how intelligence cooperation is creating a network of non-state and super-state collaboration that goes beyond Realist explanatory powers. A further example of this might be the creation of jointly run multinational intelligence centres, such as the Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Centre.[22] Regardless of whether multinational intelligence centres and intelligence sharing treaties represent self-interest in states agreeing to them in order to gain protection, or whether it is a long-term interest in institutionalising collaboration, the fact that intelligence cooperation is being conducted on a super-state level is reason to claim that Liberalism better accounts for the existence of intelligence cooperation in a globalised, not state-centric, world.

Constructivist Theory

For Constructivists, intelligence cooperation is not merely about mutual gains and humanitarian goals, as Liberals argue; it is about shared identities and norms. Intelligence agencies work together because they have a shared identity. For example, the Five Eye's of the UKUSA treaty (the US, UK, New Zealand, Canada and Australia) all share an interest in protecting and extending their liberal-democratic identity. So they group together to form an

Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

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'imagined security community' based on the shared values and norms that they use to comprise their collective identity.[23] Just as satellite states of the Soviet Union all shared intelligence in the interest of defending and extending their Communist regime, liberal states do so for the extension of a democratic peace regime. While Liberal accounts would argue that it is institutions and treaties that form multinational intelligence cooperation, Constructivists would point out that the underlying reason for this is based on identities.

The Realist assumption of the literature is that collaboration is not an end in itself, 'it is utility that drives collaboration.'[24] However it seems highly unlikely that, for example, the US would suddenly renege on a sharing agreement with the UK in order to make an enemy of them when the immediate opportunity for relative advantage becomes apparent. The same goes for most examples of states with shared identities—there is a long-term interest in trust and shared values, not the one-upmanship that Realists predict. Where practical examples of cooperation prove to be beyond their explanatory powers, Realists often turn to Game Theory to rationalise why cooperation may appear to be based on mutual gains, when in fact this is just a Realist motive to maximise interests.[25] Gill and Walsh both make reference to intelligence cooperation being akin to the Prisoner's Dilemma when they argue that states cooperate, rather than defect, when it suits their self-interest.[26] Hence for a Realist, cooperation is not an end, it is the means to the end of self-interest.

Constructivists show that intelligence cooperation is motivated by more than mere self-interest. Constructivism reveals how the Prisoner's Dilemma thought-experiment is a loaded example to justify a Realist pursuit of self-interest. This is because in the real world practice of intelligence cooperation a Prisoner's Dilemma is never a one-off opportunity to gain relative advantage; instead, IR reality presents a situation in which both 'prisoners' have played the game before and know that they will play it again. Decisions to cooperate are never a one-off in reality, because states have a history of relationships and rivalries that govern their interaction. To that effect, the outcome is likely to be cooperation, rather than defection, because the actors have built up a history of trust and they know that if they cooperate it will help them in future deals, as they are likely to enter into the same dilemma with each other again. From this long-term game of cooperation, states will not make decisions based on Realist utility but instead, they will share intelligence to create an identity community based on trust and shared values.[27]

Munton explains that intelligence cooperation is as much about soft power and non-material gains as it is about gaining intelligence. Munton focuses his article on Canadian intelligence sharing with the US over Cuban activities in the 1960's. Munton explains that while Realist theory 'provides a reasonably satisfying explanation of why the United States would seek help, it does not explain as well why Canada willingly provided assistance.'[28] Munton shows how Canada stood to gain nothing in Realist terms; however, Constructivism can explain that the reason Canada shared their intelligence on Cuba with the US was in order to develop trust and to protect the liberal-democratic identity against the threat of Communism.

Constructivist theory develops on Realist and Liberal-Institutionalist accounts by adding structure and agency into the causal framework of intelligence liaison. We have already seen how states act within the bounds of certain identity structures, because one liberal-democracy is unlikely to stab another in the back by not cooperating on intelligence. Furthermore, intelligence agencies have been a key force in recognising the existence of such identity structures in IR and have even made efforts to influence them. Stonor Saunders' book, 'Who Paid The Piper', explains how intelligence agencies have attempted to influence identity structures in IR.[29] The CIA was uncovered to be funding and cooperating with certain people and institutions to help set the agenda of what people want, namely to make European populations want to identify with liberal-democratic structures rather than Soviet Communist structures. This also shows the use of non-militaristic action and soft power by intelligence agencies, which transcends the explanatory powers of Realism. Hence, Constructivist accounts explain the existence and use of structures that govern the intelligence cooperation between states.

Constructivism uses the concept of agency to correct the Realist notion that states are the main actors in IR and that their actions are predetermined by self-interest. Agents are often what set a state's interest in intelligence cooperation, and often an agent's interests are constructed by their relationship with another agent. For example, Bush and Blair shared a strong friendship and grand vision for the world, because of their compatible personalities and agendas in the Middle East their countries came to vastly increase their intelligence sharing.[30] A further

Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

Written by Marcus Wethered

example would be the close relationship between Thatcher and Reagan, which lead to the US secretly providing 'clandestine help' to the UK during the Falklands war.[31] Hence, Constructivism explains how agency can change the interests and identities of states and consequently can change its intelligence cooperation agreements with other states.

Although Constructivism can cover some of the gaps in the explanatory powers of Realism and Liberal-Institutionalism, it should be noted that this does not go as far to say that Constructivist motives for sharing intelligence are always more beneficial for states to act upon. Structures can often become shackles that restrict those within them—this is because security communities share intelligence and collaborate on all stages of the intelligence cycle, which often erodes the possibility of ideas being challenged. For example, the Butler Report into the intelligence failure over Iraqi WMD's identified 'group-think' as a crucial reason for why almost every intelligence agency involved mistakenly claimed that Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear weapons.[32] Therefore, Constructivism may better explain why states cooperate with those that share their identities than Realism does, but it does not mean that such decisions are always more beneficial than acting independently.

Realist Responses

The first Realist response to the Constructivist understanding of intelligence cooperation is that Constructivism is hard to employ in practice. States and decision-makers will think in terms of whether or not intelligence liaison will advance their egoistic or altruistic interests, not in terms of how to construct shared identities. Constructivists can rebut this by explaining that actors will cooperate over intelligence based on where their trust has been built-up, and that is often explained by shared values and identities, as states are more likely to trust those who share their values. To that effect, Constructivism can be seen to explain what constructs a state's self-interest, and so it explains the underlying causes for Realist actions in intelligence cooperation.

However, there are some practical examples of intelligence cooperation (or lack thereof) that are undeniably driven by Realist interests. In the 1980's, the US famously halted the flow of intelligence to New Zealand in response to the latter's withdrawal of facilities for US nuclear ships.[33] A second example, given by Aldrich, is US's decision to temporarily stop the flow of signals intelligence to Britain in response to the Prime Minister's decision to not allow US intelligence gathering from British bases in Cyprus during the Yom Kippur War.[34] These examples show that Realist interests in intelligence exchange were prioritised over any Constructivist interests in common bonds and any Liberal interests of upholding agreements and treaties.

Another set of examples of Realist interests can be found in the use of unsavoury intelligence liaison partners by liberal-democracies.[35] Some liberal-democracies have cooperated with the intelligence agencies of states that breach human rights, and so the decision to liaise with such illiberal partners could only have been motivated by self-interest, because there has been a clear disregard for humanitarian concerns in such cases. For example, US SIGINT stations in Iran were considered important enough by President Carter that the ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, was told that intelligence operations between the CIA and SAVAK should continue, despite the Shah's poor human rights record.[36] The US also used a range of unsavoury allies in their attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, including the American mafia.[37] The US and UK, and potentially many others, have cooperated with numerous foreign intelligence agencies that go against their humanitarian principles, and so their actions can be charged with being motivated solely by self-interest and practicality.

Combining Theories

We can identify examples of intelligence cooperation that have clearly been driven by Realist motives (such as the US' cooperation with illiberal allies),[38] Liberal motives (such as the US providing intelligence to international judicial proceedings),[39] and Constructivist motives (such as the CIA's attempt to influence Communist structures).[40] Svendsen rationalises that because there are different theoretical explanations for state's motives at different moments in time, we therefore need to use different theories collectively to explain the complex dynamics of intelligence cooperation.[41] Munton explains that 'these often-contrasting theories are not either-or,' instead they can compliment each other.[42] The notion that there can be no overlap between these theories is part of a discourse

Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

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of each theory to present itself as the sole template of analysis in IR. Therefore, theories of intelligence cooperation can be used to compliment and fill in the gaps of each other's explanatory powers.[43]

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay and the theory is yet to be applied to this topic, a further theoretical consideration for the intelligence cooperation debate to contemplate is a Post-Structuralist lens which could be useful in showing that intelligence observation is not objective.[44] As with Foucault's panopticism, whereby subjects change when they are being watched, intelligence observation may change when it is being shared.[45]

Conclusion

Although there are some examples of intelligence cooperation that can only be explained by Realism, to extend that understanding into the claim that Realism accounts for all intelligence cooperation is a leap of logic. Liberal-Institutionalist theories can provide an explanation for times when states have put humanitarian interests over self-interest.[46] Constructivism is also able to provide a convincing account of how identity, trust, structure, and agency can construct a state's interest in sharing intelligence. With the increased application of alternative theories to the literature, we can come to understand that there has been an unspoken Realist monopoly on IS theory which needs challenging. Considering that there are different examples of intelligence cooperation that can be explained by all three of the theories assessed, it therefore seems that a combination of theories best explains the multifaceted reasons why states cooperate over intelligence.

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Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

Written by Marcus Wethered

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Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

Written by Marcus Wethered

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Does Realism Best Explain Intelligence Cooperation Between States?

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Date written: April 2014

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