

History and Culture in Intelligence Analysis

[Ioannis E. Kotoulas](mailto:ikotoulas@turkmas.uoa.gr) (Ph.D. in History, Ph.D. in Geopolitics), ikotoulas@turkmas.uoa.gr

Adjunct Lecturer in Geopolitics, University of Athens, Greece

Guest Lecturer, State Department/Foreign Service Institute

Presentation at the 1st Intelligence Studies Summit
of National Intelligence University,
13-14 March 2025



Similar methodologies of History and Intelligence Analysis

The methodology of Intelligence Analysis presents core similarities with social sciences, History in particular as an academic discipline, as the life work of Sherman Kent (1903-1986) (Kent, 1951) and William Leonard Langer (1897-1980) has demonstrated and as documented in subsequent bibliography (Platt, 1957; Knorr, 1964; Benson, 1981; Burris, 1993; Marrin, 2017). Intelligence analysis involves the interpretation of information concerning the adversary or a geopolitical environment for purposes of assisting decision-making. History is the interpretation of the past through the detection of patterns and causal effects. Both intelligence analysts and historians rely on fragmentary information that has to be properly evaluated, ranked in importance and weaved into a coherent whole. Historians perceive international developments and foreign policy issues through a deep-time lens based on decades- or centuries-long understanding (Warner, 2017).

Besides process knowledge, i.e. the methodology of evaluation and processing of information, analysts need matter knowledge as well related to their object of analysis (Marrin, 2011, 1-2). Historical and cultural knowledge of a country, region or population is essential in both understanding and making informed assessments of temporary situations and predictions of possible scenarios. History can enable analysts to identify patterns and recurring themes, to detect similarities between current and past events. Historical research as an aspect of intelligence analysis highlights the deep level of current events and the major forces at work. History follows a clear line of deductive reasoning, determining outcomes from initial factors presenting a detached bird's-eye view over events thus escaping the myopic, shortsighted perception of many analyses that overemphasize the importance of current events (Gaddis, 2002).

Interpretations of the present and forecasts of the future cannot be based on just a knowledge of the short-term historical level. This is not just a manifestation of intellectual parochialism or 'triumphalism of the present' that was so in vogue in the 1990s, but a serious methodological mistake that systemically reduces analysis to a recapitulation of past decades and disregards the underlying forces of centuries. As Benson suggests, 'careful policy-oriented historical research can have an impact' because it improves 'the government's understanding of the historical forces at work' which is particularly valuable in intelligence organizations which 'encourage the detachment and long-term perspective valued by historians' (Benson, 1981).

In historiography, the French Annales School distinguishes between three levels of historical time. The first level is defined as *short-time* and can be related to specific events manifested in each period frame and related to a factual perception of history (*histoire evenementielle*); such facts

include revolutions, wars or other political and military conflicts and upheavals that last for a specific period. The second level of historical time, *middle-time*, is related to social transformation and small-scale demographic changes, such as a youth bulge, i.e. a youthful structure (ages 15-29) among a given population. Youth bulges are associated with the increased possibility of intra-state tension and high levels of violence or social tension (Mesquida & Wiener, 1999). Finally, the third level of historical time, the *long-time* or *long-term* (*longue durée*), emphasizes the importance of geophysical and macro-historical structures, such as geography and the cultural references of a population (Braudel, 1980). As a social science, History is based on a four-stage process of description, explanation, evaluation, and prediction.

Intelligence analysis features similar typologies, as the one introduced by Sherman Kent. *Basic descriptive intelligence analysis* focuses on the past, *current reportorial intelligence analysis* describes and evaluates the present, and *speculative evaluative intelligence analysis* extrapolates into the future offering scenarios (Kent, 1951, pp. 11-65). Modern typologies distinguish between various forms of intelligence (Marrin, 2011, pp. 11-12, 17-18):

- i) *current intelligence*, which has a shorter time reference focusing on day-to-day events;
- ii) *research intelligence* which is a more in-depth approach than current intelligence and takes into account geography, demography, societal norms, and culture to offer informed analysis;
- iii) *estimative intelligence* providing informed assessments of possible outcomes;
- iv) *warning intelligence* focusing on impending dangers and long-term effects and challenges.

History and culture are related to the whole spectrum of intelligence analysis, but mostly to research intelligence and estimative intelligence.

The combination of Intelligence Analysis with History can be useful for policy proposals and strategic thinking, providing cognitive depth, conceptual frameworks, and historical context. Intelligence professionals can be aided in their forecast of potential outcomes through the study of historical precedents, always keeping in mind that each case features distinct characteristics. The Greek Civil War (1946-1949) was facilitated by the mountainous territorial relief of the country, from the influx of refugees in the previous decades that created new societal and political dynamics, but also by macrohistorical patterns, such as the geopolitical antagonism between Greece and its Slavic northern neighbors which aspired to obtain access to the Aegean Sea. Insurgencies in Africa or South Asia are related to ethnic fragmentation and previous colonial rule. So, geography, history, and geopolitics are all essential in understanding a conflict.

On a more strictly intelligence-related level, historical experience of past operations, both successes and failures, is useful (Walton, 2010). History of intelligence operations and procedures can create an institutional memory that shall place future estimates in a greater context of efficiency and continuity. Strategic Foresight, a developing field related to Intelligence Analysis, is related to the interaction of disciplines, such as History and International Relations, and the importance of predictive warning (Sotiriadis & Grove, 2020. Cf. Smith, 2008).

Demography, International Relations and Geopolitics

Besides History, complementary academic disciplines as Demography, International Relations, and Geopolitics are essential aspects of a comprehensive approach in intelligence analysis. Let us review some examples of historical patterns that have unfolded over the centuries. Many wars have lasted for the duration of a generation, of a specific cohort (25-30 years). Examples include the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), the Religious Wars (1618-1648) and the two World Wars viewed as a unity (1914-1945). Although historical time has accelerated due to new technologies, in many areas around the world it is only when the generation changes that meaningful alteration of mentalities and perceptions can effectively occur for political change to take place. The existence of a youth bulge in a society correlates with internal political conflicts (Mesquida & Wiener, 1999).

International Relations as a discipline is useful for intelligence analysis. Among the competing research programs of International Relations, neoclassical realism is the most recent and elaborate version of the realist hermeneutic framework. Neoclassical realism preserves the essential assumptions of realism, such as the state-centered structure of the international system, the perception of states as rational actors and the anarchy of the international system, while incorporating the emphasis on systemic structure observed in structural realism. Alterations of power balance and distribution in the international system (Realpolitik) affect state actors. Still, state actors are also decisively influenced not just by the external structure, but also by internal variables (Innenpolitik), including the strategic culture of a country, ideological references of elites and social perceptions (Ripsman, Taliaffero & Lobell, 2016).

Geopolitics is crucial with its emphasis on unalterable geographical realities, dynamics of state antagonism that unfold over greater areas and across the historical continuum. Essential loci of Classical Geopolitics as the spatial unities of Heartland and Rimland developed by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman respectively, feature considerable long-term interpretative quality. During the Cold War, the major clashes occurred on the coastal periphery of the inaccessible continental

hinterland of Eurasia; U.S. as the hegemonic sea power attempted to curb the expansionism of the continental powers (Soviet Union and China) in Korea and Vietnam. Geopolitics with its multidisciplinary approach and its emphasis on macrohistorical patterns including the cultural parameter is close to neoclassical realism.

Points of caution

At this point, we should introduce certain points of caution in our assessment of the hermeneutic worth of History and Culture for Intelligence Analysis. Relying on the historical past as an unchecked guide and more importantly carrying historical analogies too far is by definition a mistake (Peake, 1993). Complex historical realities do not repeat themselves, even if patterns of continuity are evident. Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice. For it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

Concerning specifically the terminology used in analyses, the recurring notions of a 'new Vietnam' concerning military setbacks, of a 'new Cold War' concerning the global landscape, or of a 'new Interwar' or a 'new Weimar' concerning the political landscape in many European countries, are erroneous or in best case half-truths. Such rhetorical devices may sound like nice starting points, but they fail to grasp the complex realities of politics at work; they just offer a reassuring interpretative companion that helps us navigate the troubled waters of international diplomacy, albeit temporarily. The elaborate notion of Thucydides' Trap on the possibility of a military conflict between the U.S. and China that draws on the Peloponnesian War between rising Athens and Sparta is based on an erroneous translation of the ancient Greek text; Thucydides does not talk of 'inevitability' (Platias & Trigkas, 2021). Finally, a 'reverse Kissinger' approach concerning U.S. relations with China and Russia is the latest example in this category of parabolic terminology that relies on history.

In general, social sciences suffer from lack of certainty that relates to their inability to effectively study the subject matter in a laboratory. If we compare social sciences to the physical and natural sciences, where hypotheses can be tested and validated through experimentation in a laboratory and the influence of extraneous variables is controlled. Social sciences cannot gain the same level of predictability as natural sciences. Likewise, intelligence analysts have to wait for the events to unfold to verify or refute their estimates. Intelligence Analysis specifically due to its nature features the following inherent disadvantages: i) short deadlines, so that analysis has to be carried with no prior acquisition of sufficient information, therefore a minimal base of information; ii)

information warfare conducted by rival actors and the possibility of deception; iii) inability to control the variables in a dynamic environment. Moreover, Intelligence Analysis often has to reduce a complicated environment to a set of clearly defined directives for use by the political leadership. (Marrin, 2011, pp. 39-40)

The danger of essentialism inherent in macro-historical perspectives can be reduced through the positivist and goal-oriented contribution of intelligence analysis. Intelligence Analysis already provides methodologies and practices of research and metatheoretical self-reflection that enhance its effectiveness. These include the 'lessons learned' approach deriving from reports following operations, histories of the intelligence cycle itself, and the ability to perceive the international environment without cognitive bias originating from own culture, ideology, and beliefs (Whitesmith, 2010). This last aspect is in my opinion essential in intelligence analysis and brings us to the importance of culture and of the varying realities existent in the international environment.

Culture in international relations

The cultural context of analysis is of paramount importance. Credible intelligence analysis is linked to knowledge of the specific historical and cultural landscape of regions of interest, the dominant perceptions of the world that we can describe as 'mental maps', their demographic dynamics and historical patterns of coexistence and conflict or of hierarchical relations in multiethnic polities. Concerning inter-state relations and perceptions, cultural understanding based on a deep historical knowledge can assist intelligence analysts to grasp the motivations and behavior patterns of various societies. Not just the external environment influences the strategic behavior of states, but also internal factors bearing symbolic meaning and determining decisions of the leadership. Analysts should not project their own perception of values onto other actors, especially non-Western actors with long history and embedded cultural values that have created varying lens to interpret the international environment, as well as different worldviews and expectations. Cognitive bias in intelligence analysis that disregards cultural peculiarities of nations and states and their divergent historical trajectories can produce erroneous assumptions and negative results.

A common mistake in analyses derives from a systemic neorealist reading of the international system, according to which all states would act in the same manner under identical circumstances. This reduces history to a systemic mechanics of inter-state relations that does not take into account the historical and geopolitical background of states, populations, and regions. The different paths of historical development and occurrence of conflicts around the globe refute the culture-blind systemic

approach. By understanding the history and culture of a state, we can understand how they perceive their relations with other states. Instead, neoclassical realism offers a more elaborate approach taking into account both the international environment and internal factors, such as the strategic culture and history of a country. The war in Ukraine is intricately related to the importance of history and culture for intelligence analysis.

The war in Ukraine as a case study

In this context, I use the war in Ukraine as a case study highlighting the importance of history and culture in presenting reliable intelligence analyses. Understanding the war in Ukraine requires a previous knowledge of both the geopolitical and historical context, of the entangled symbiosis of Russians and Ukrainians in the historical *longue durée*, of Russian strategic culture and of the erroneous perceptions of Russian revisionism that actually led to the decision of invasion itself and to the expectation of an easy victory. What are the patterns related to the war in Ukraine and how could History as a discipline have contributed to a better understanding of Russia's strategic goals and expectations with the decision to invade the Ukrainian territory? (Kotoulas, 2024)

Concerning history, the entangled symbiosis of Russians and Ukrainians is essential for understanding the ongoing conflict. The Russian perception of Ukrainian national identity had been essentially diminutive and rejective of a Ukrainian identity, except from brief episodes, notably during the early Soviet period (1922-1930) and in the postwar period, in the 1950s and 1960s before a second wave of Russian-centered Sovietization would be unleashed on the Ukrainian people. Russian revisionism is not an isolated incident; instead, it is a part of a continuum of foreign policy objectives and forms a fundamental part of Russian statecraft and power projection (Kotoulas, 2022a; Kotoulas 2022b). Ukraine as a historical and cultural factor occupies a special place in Russian imaginary ideological constructions and foreign policy objectives. Russian geopolitical revisionism is accompanied by a relevant discourse that includes both historical revisionism and the instrumentalization of WWII mental constructs.

The failure of Russian intelligence estimates was evident in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The erroneous perception amidst Russian intelligence that the Ukrainian population, especially the Russian-speaking part in the southern and eastern areas, would welcome the Russian army as a liberator, was refuted by the resistance of the population and the ensuing evolution of the war. This wrong cultural perception, dominant among the Russian leadership and intelligence community, was also a seminal factor in the decision itself of the invasion. Thus, cognitive bias in intelligence analysis,

originating from both cultural and historical prejudices or lack of historical knowledge, and from the autarchic character of the Russian system itself with its tendency of conformity, contributed to an erroneous image of Ukraine and led to the very decision to invade.

Conclusions

History and culture are essential aspects of an enhanced intelligence analysis, as we search for meaning behind short-time events and long-time patterns, and as we attempt to predict future outcomes in a complex milieu of interwoven geopolitical, economic, and cultural forces underlying the international environment. A multidisciplinary approach that would combine disciplines, i.e. Intelligence Analysis with History and International Relations, would benefit both research and analytical skills presenting the possibility of *ex ante* estimates, not just *post factum* evaluations. A greater 'historical sense' could make analysts more rigorous in their work and enable them to view greater patterns that supersede short-term events, to discern underlying causal forces and their effects. In this context, Intelligence Analysis can be understood as a version of 'applied historiography' discerning not just current events, but taking also into account long-term trends, macrohistorical patterns, the underlying forces of geography, demography, and culture.

References

- Benson, S. (1981). The Historian as Foreign Policy Analyst: The Challenge of the CIA. *The Public Historian* 3:1, 15-25.
- Braudel, F. (1980). 'History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée', in: F. Braudel, *On History*. tr. S. Matthews, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 25-54.
- Burris, W.C. (1993). The uses of history in intelligence analysis, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 6:3, 297-301.
- Gaddis, J. (2002). *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kent, S. (1951) *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Knorr, K. (1964). *Foreign Intelligence and the Social Sciences*. Center of International Studies, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 1964.
- Kotoulas, I. (2022a). 'Russia as a Revisionist State and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine', in: I. Ivanovych (ed.), *The Russian-Ukrainian War (2014-2022): Historical, Political, Cultural-Educational, Religious, Economic and Legal Aspects*, Riga: Baltija Publishing, 2022, 551-556.
- Kotoulas, I. (2022b). *Orthodox Geopolitics: How Russia Uses Religion for its Foreign Policy*, Foreign Affairs Institute Report No. 5, 10/2022, [link](#)

- Kotoulas, I. (2024). Geopolitics of the war against Ukraine. Athens: Papazissis [in Greek].
- Marrin, S. (2011). Improving intelligence analysis: Bridging the gap between scholarship and practice. London and New York: Routledge.
- Marrin, S. (2017). Understanding and improving intelligence analysis by learning from other disciplines. *Intelligence and National Security* 32, 539-547.
- Mesquida, C.G. & N.I. Wiener (1999). Male Age Composition and the Severity of Conflicts. *Politics in Life Sciences* 18:2, 181-189.
- Peake, C.H. (1993). History's Role in Intelligence Estimating, CIA Historical Review Program 1993, <https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/History-Role-Intelligence-Estimating.pdf>
- Platias, A. & V. Trigkas (2021). "Unraveling the Thucydides' Trap: Inadvertent Escalation or War of Choice?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14:2, 219-255.
- Platt, W. (1957). Strategic Intelligence Production: Basic Principles. Praeger.
- Ripsman, N.M., J.W. Taliaferro & S.E. Lobell (2016). Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, T.J. (2008). Predictive Warning: Teams, Networks, and Scientific Method', in: Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (eds.), *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*. Georgetown University Press, 2008, pp. 266-280.
- Sotiriadis, J. & J.V. Grove, (2020). Strategic Foresight and Futures Studies: A Methodological Approach', in: *Global Futures Report: Alternative Futures of Geopolitical Competition in a Post-Covid-19 World*, U.S. Air Force Warfighting Integration Capability, 6/2020, 4-6.
- Walton, T. (2010). Challenges in Intelligence Analysis: Lessons from 1300 BCE to the Present. Cambridge University Press.
- Warner, M. (2017). Analysis as history, and history as analysis: a search for common goals and standards. *Intelligence and National Security*, 32(5), 613-624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2017.1310974>
- Whitesmith, M. (2020). Cognitive Bias in Intelligence Analysis: Testing the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses Method (Intelligence, Surveillance and Secret Warfare): Improving Analytical Efforts for National Intelligence. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.