



Saskia Pothoven is a PhD candidate at the Netherlands Defence Academy and also works for the Central Staff of the Ministry of Defence. This article, which approaches the topic from a specifically Dutch perspective, derives from a more extensive article by the author on the same subject for an international audience entitled: 'Producer-Client Paradigms for Defence Intelligence', which was published in the June issue of *Defence Studies: Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*.



# Questioning the sacred cows

## *Military perspective on the relationship between intelligence producers and their clients*

Saskia Pothoven MA\*

The relationship between intelligence producers and their clients has been the subject of debate for decades, both in academic and professional circles. The military intelligence domain differs from the civilian domain in a number of important respects, and thus requires special attention. It is therefore relevant to assess the extent to which prevailing views about the intelligence producer-client relationship – the ‘sacred cows’ – which are usually based on the civilian intelligence domain, persist in the military intelligence domain. This article offers a military perspective on the intelligence producer-client relationship with reference to three distinctive characteristics and three sacred cows arising from literature study. The focus here is on the strategic level.

*Institutional embedding could put pressure on a military intelligence producer to provide analyses that are not detrimental to their own organisation*

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In order to be able to investigate how the prevailing conceptualisations based on the civilian intelligence domain persist within the military intelligence domain, the characteristics of military intelligence services must first be considered. These services are often the result of an amalgamation or centralisation of intelligence services from various branches of the armed forces and mainly serve the political and military strategic level.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the Netherlands, the Defence Intelligence and Security Service (NLD DISS) stems from the Military Intelligence Service (MID), which was created in 1988 from an amalgamation of the Naval Intelligence Service (MARID), the Army Intelligence Service (LAMID) and the Air Force Intelligence Service (LUID). With the introduction of the Intelligence and Security Services Act (Wiv) in 2002, the MID was renamed NLD DISS.<sup>2</sup>

Military intelligence services have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from civilian intelligence services. Firstly, we see a high degree of ‘institutional embedding’, which means that these types of intelligence services are part of the organisation that is also their main client: the Ministry of Defence. This also includes the relationship with the intelligence functionalities within the armed forces, which are responsible for intelligence gathering, analysis and dissemination during deployment of the armed forces. This institutional embedding creates a more intimate relationship

with the main clients than is customary in the civilian intelligence domain. One possible consequence of this is that it could put more pressure on a military intelligence producer to modify analyses in such a way that they are not detrimental to the defence organisation,<sup>3</sup> for example by adjusting probability levels or threat levels to ensure wider parliamentary support for military deployment.

A second characteristic of military intelligence services is the mix of civilian and military personnel. Strategic military intelligence services such as NLD DISS have a unique double position because they straddle the middle of the dichotomy between civilian and military intelligence culture.<sup>4</sup> For example, the majority of the staff at NLD DISS are civilian.<sup>5</sup> As a result, there may be differences in leadership style and career and training opportunities, and complications can arise with regard to a shared identity.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the producer-client relationship within the military intelligence domain, this can lead in particular to challenges between military and civilian personnel on the different sides of the relationship.

Although in this type of organisation, the majority of the staff are civilian, these intelligence organisations are nevertheless rooted in military organisations and are thus influenced by cultural traits that are considered typically military. These include a high appreciation of hierarchy, rules and discipline, competencies and status, and clear lines of authority and accountability.<sup>7</sup> Characteristics that are generally highly valued within military organisations, such as decision-making and teamwork, can conflict with the requirements of intelligence work, such as qualifications, avoiding black-and-white thinking and continuous questioning and revision.<sup>8</sup>

Another characteristic is that military personnel often rotate frequently between different roles, often after just three years. This can result in knowledge and a good relationship with intelligence and/or producers and/or clients not being retained in the organisation. On the other hand, frequent rotation can also result in

1 Philip Davies, ‘The Problem of Defence Intelligence’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (2016) 799.

2 B. de Graaf, E. Muller and J. van Reijn, *Inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten* (Deventer, Wolters Kluwer, 2010).

3 S. Rietjens, ‘Intelligence in defence organisations: a tour de force’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (2020) 719.

4 J. Thomson, ‘Governance costs and defence intelligence provisions in the UK: a case study in macroeconomic theory’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (2016) 854.

5 Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service, *Annual report 2019* (The Hague, Ministry of Defence).

6 NATO STO HFM-226 TASK GROUP 2018; I. Goldenberg et al., ‘Integrated defence workforces: Challenges and enablers of military-civilian collaboration’, *Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 8 (2019) 33.

7 J. Soeters, ‘Organizational Cultures in the Military’, in: G. Caforio and M. Nuciarì (eds.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (New York, Springer, 2018) 254.

8 M. Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996) 250.

producers of intelligence and clients having performed a role on the other side of the relationship (for example, first as an analyst at NLD DISS and then at the J2 of the Department of Operations, DOPS), which can lead to a better understanding of each other's duties and responsibilities.

A final aspect of military culture is its Janus-faced character, which means that military organisations work in two opposite situations, namely both in 'hot situations', such as combat situations that require immediate action, and 'cold situations', such as training, exercises and preparation for deployment. In line with this, there may be 'hot intelligence', aimed at matters such as mission support and 'cold intelligence', aimed at long-term objectives.

## The sacred cows

### The weather forecast and the umbrella

In the debate on the intelligence producer-client relationship, the issue of proximity is often questioned: how close or far should producers and consumers be from each other? In general, two schools can be distinguished in this respect. Traditionalists say that there must be a clear separation between intelligence analysis and policy because otherwise there is a risk of an intelligence product being influenced by policy preferences, which, in extreme cases, could lead to politicisation. The well-known saying at NLD DISS 'We give you the weather forecast, but we won't tell you whether you should take an umbrella' clearly resonates with this. The transfer of the J2 functionality from NLD DISS to the DOPS in response to the *Dessens Report* of 2006 can also be placed within this traditional framework.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the activist approach indicates that without interaction, there is also little relevance, and in fact advocates for a close relationship between intelligence producers and clients, whereby intelligence is related to and directed by policy objectives and intelligence analysts must have a deep and solid understanding of how policy is established.<sup>10</sup>

Politicisation means that intelligence is adapted to be more in line with policy preferences.<sup>11</sup> It is

'We give you the weather forecast, but we won't tell you whether you should take an umbrella'

therefore also referred to as 'intelligence to please'.<sup>12</sup> This can take place both under clear coercion and by creating an environment in which analysts feel limited in drawing conclusions that do not match the preferences of the management or the client.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the risk of politicisation or intelligence to please, military intelligence organisations may run an even greater risk of a phenomenon known as 'situating the estimate'. This means that a threat assessment is made based on the capabilities of the armed forces and that threats against which no action can be taken are ignored in the analysis.<sup>14</sup>

9 C. Dessens, *Inlichtingen en veiligheid Defensie. Kwaliteit, capaciteit en samenwerking (Intelligence and Security, Defence: Quality, Capacity and Cooperation)* (Dessens Committee, 2006).

10 See J. Davis, 'The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949', *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 35, No. 2 (1992) 91-103.

11 See inter alia J. Rovner, 'Is Politicization Ever a Good Thing?', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2013) 55-67.

12 H. Ransom, 'The Politicization of Intelligence', in: S. Cimbala (ed.), *Intelligence and the Intelligence Policy in a Democratic Society* (Dobs Ferry, Transnational Publishers, 1987) 26.

13 G. Hastedt, 'The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence: The American Experience', *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2013) 5-31; Rovner, 'Is Politicization Ever a Good Thing?', 56.

14 S. Badsey et al. (ed.), *The Falklands Conflict Twenty Years On. Lessons for the Future* (New York, Routledge, 2004) 97.





*Afghanistan, 2007: in particular in deployment areas, military intelligence organisations have an intimate relationship with the armed forces' intelligence entities*

PHOTO TEUN VOETEN

Military intelligence organisations have an intimate relationship, particularly in deployment areas, with the armed forces' intelligence entities, which is reinforced by the embedding in the same parent organisation. For example, intelligence services use these entities as on-site sensors. At the same time, in some cases these intelligence entities may also use analyses from a military intelligence service. Depending on the level and type of product, it is therefore possible to be at the same time both an intelligence producer and client. This could include, for instance, a J2 section that receives a strategic intelligence product from a military intelligence service and uses this product to produce an analysis intended for the tactical or operational level, although this is less common in the Dutch context because of the current setup of the DOPS J2, which does not have the

analysis capacity. While in the Netherlands this is placed in the client domain, in countries like the US or UK a J2 section is more likely to be an intelligence producer because of its expansive analysis capacity. This shows that the producer-client relationship, which is often presented as a dichotomy, could perhaps be better conceptualised as a layered network of different intelligence entities.

In addition, different characteristics of military organisations, such as the frequent rotation of military personnel, a tighter-knit community life because of stationing and informal ties through training and deployment, can contribute to a closer relationship between military intelligence producers and clients. On the other hand, the mix of military and civilian personnel can increase the distance. Herman calls this 'the basic problem of civilian credibility', because civilians lack knowledge of military resources and culture.<sup>15</sup> While officers usually have operational knowledge and technical expertise, civilian staff more often

<sup>15</sup> Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, 249.

<sup>16</sup> A. Wolfberg, 'When generals consume intelligence: the problems that arise and how they solve them', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2021) 472.

have experience at the strategic and policy level.<sup>16</sup> These types of knowledge and experience can complement each other, but may also lead to complications and mutual incomprehension, in particular when it comes to a military intelligence analyst and a civilian client and vice versa.

### **Analytic objectivity as holy grail**

A second sacred cow in the intelligence producer-client relationship is the ideal of analytical objectivity. The idea behind this is that it is the most effective way to avoid influencing an intelligence product, and that politicisation can be avoided.<sup>17</sup>

Objectivity and the distance from decision-making as mentioned in relation to the first sacred cow are generally considered crucial in the ethos of an intelligence analyst.<sup>18</sup> They form the basis for the concept ‘speaking truth to power’, which is often mentioned as an important task of the analyst. Analytic objectivity, to be achieved for example by eliminating prejudices in an analytic product by means of analytic techniques, is used as a means of truth-finding. The pursuit of objectivity and a quest for the truth are embedded in the thinking of intelligence services. There is good reason why the motto of NLD DISS is *meritum in veritatum discernendo*: the merit lies in the recognition of the truth.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with the pursuit of analytic objectivity is that it requires the absence of bias, which has been acknowledged to be unachievable. What is more, cognitive biases are necessary to make an assessment from incomplete data.<sup>20</sup> In addition, ensuring that a consumer of intelligence faces inconvenient facts and unwanted interpretation requires a bias towards warning, which is often described in terms of (overly) positive policy makers versus (overly) pessimistic intelligence analysis.<sup>21</sup> Intelligence consumers also often ignore intelligence that does not suit them, which diminishes the value of analytic objectivity. A higher degree of objectivity therefore does not necessarily make intelligence more influential,<sup>22</sup> all the more because taking decisions often

involves subjectivity and decision-makers are often presented with several versions of ‘the truth’.<sup>23</sup>

Because complete analytic objectivity cannot be achieved in practice, all analysts in fact fall short if this is required as a standard. It could therefore be useful to shift the narrative from terms such as ‘truth-finding’ and speaking truth to power to more relative considerations such as integrity and the ‘call it as you see it’ approach.<sup>24</sup> In line with these considerations, Woodard argues, for example, for objective honesty (making assumptions and reasoning explicit) instead of policy neutrality.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of speaking truth to power may also apply more to tactical intelligence support than to strategic intelligence analysis.<sup>26</sup> This was applicable especially in the Cold War, when the analytic task was primarily based on tactical puzzles (such as the number of weapons held by the Soviet Union and their location). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, analytic issues became increasingly complex and strategic, moving more in the direction of mysteries which had no clear solution.<sup>27</sup> As a result, it has become even more difficult to pursue analytical objectivity.

- 17 S. Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity and science: evaluating the US Intelligence Community’s approach to applied epistemology’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2020) 350.
- 18 Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity’, 353.
- 19 Defence Intelligence and Security Service (NLD DISS) Public Annual Report 2019.
- 20 Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity’, 354.
- 21 Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity’, 354.
- 22 T. Fingar, ‘Intelligence and Grand Strategy’, *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012) 128.
- 23 Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity’, 355.
- 24 Marrin, ‘Analytic objectivity’, 360.
- 25 N. Woodard, ‘Tasting the Forbidden Fruit. Unlocking the Potential of Positive Politicization’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2013) 91-108.
- 26 J. Kerbell and A. Olcott, ‘Synthesizing with clients, not analyzing for customers’, *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2010) 13.
- 27 W. Agrell and G. Treverton, *National Intelligence and Science. Beyond the Great Divide in Analysis and Policy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014) 36; G. Treverton, ‘Risks and Riddles. The Soviet Union was a puzzle. Al Qaeda is a mystery. Why we need to know the difference’, *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 2007.



SOURCE: CIA PUBLICATION 'PRESIDENT NIXON AND THE ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE IN THE 1973 ARAB-ISRAELI WAR'



Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (left) meets with US President Richard Nixon in October 1973: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, analytic issues have become increasingly complex and strategic

This difference can also be illustrated by comparing Clausewitz's theory with that of the Swiss strategist Jomini. While Jomini's supporters see the intelligence domain primarily as an exact science that can be approached with mathematical logic, Clausewitz's adherents believe there will always be a certain degree of uncertainty in intelligence analysis.<sup>28</sup>

While intelligence organisations generally espouse the Clausewitzian approach, the pursuit of analytic objectivity is actually more in line with Jomini's thinking.<sup>29</sup> Because of military characteristics such as decisiveness, discipline

and clear lines of authority, the military intelligence domain may be based even more on Jomini's thinking than the civilian intelligence domain. Military intelligence services usually also provide operational and tactical intelligence, such as threat assessments or mission support. This mix of strategic, operational and tactical intelligence support may ensure that strategic analysis is also conducted more according to Jomini's thinking, and is therefore treated more like a puzzle than a mystery. An example of this is NATO's Intelligence Warning System (NIWS), which uses a range of indicators in an attempt to identify new threats at an early stage.

#### **Intelligence forms the basis for decision-making**

According to traditional views, intelligence analysts provide information to decision-makers, who then use it to take decisions. In practice, however, especially at the strategic level, intelligence is by no means always used as the basis for decision-making.<sup>30</sup> While consumers of

28 S. Rietjens, 'Omgevingsbewustzijn voor militaire inzet: a mission (im)possible', *Militaire Spectator* 189 (2020) (4) 174-189; Agrell and Treverton, *National Intelligence and Science*, 36.

29 Agrell and Treverton, *National Intelligence and Science*, 36.

30 See, for example, L. Johnson, 'Bricks and mortar for a theory of intelligence', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003) 1-28; S. Marrin, 'Why strategic intelligence analysis has limited influence on American foreign policy', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (2017) 725-742; Rovner, 'Is Politicization Ever a Good Thing?', 2011; P. Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy. Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reforms* (New York City, Columbia University Press, 2011).

intelligence products find that these products are not always relevant enough for them, intelligence analysts are often frustrated if their products are not used or are not used correctly.<sup>31</sup> Although this need not always be a problem because decision-makers can include other considerations than just what is in an intelligence analysis, the developments in the US that led to the invasion in Iraq in 2003 are a clear example of what can go wrong if intelligence is disregarded or misused, with all the consequences this entails. Information was cherry picked, for instance, i.e. used selectively by clients, and there was 'stovepiping' or 'b-teaming' by the Office of Special Plans.<sup>32</sup> This means that raw intelligence is analysed without the involvement of an intelligence service. Related to this, intelligence from the British was sent directly to the prime minister in the Netherlands, without the Dutch intelligence services being able to give an opinion on this.<sup>33</sup> These kinds of cases can also occur when hierarchy and authority are too highly valued, with the run-up to Pearl Harbor serving as an historical example in this regard. Admiral Richmond Turner, the US Navy Director of War Plans, who himself had no intelligence experience, considered the judgments of his own division to be superior to those of the staff of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), who, in his view, had too little seniority. As a result, Turner began to produce his own intelligence analyses separately from the ONI, which was ultimately a major cause for the failure to anticipate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>34</sup>

At the foundation of this traditional view lies the intelligence cycle, which divides the intelligence process into the five sequential stages: planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination.<sup>35</sup> This model has been criticised in intelligence literature for some time as an oversimplification of a very complex process.<sup>36</sup> Despite this, the intelligence cycle is still widespread in the thinking about the intelligence producer-client relationship and can be found in several military doctrines, including the *Dutch Joint Doctrine Publication 2, on intelligence*.<sup>37</sup> It could be argued that due to several characteristics of military

In intelligence literature, the intelligence cycle has been criticised for some time as an oversimplification of a very complex process

organisations, the use of a simplified representation of reality by means of a model is preferred. Firstly, stereotypical military characteristics such as a top-down organisational structure and clear lines of authority do not always align with complex realities. Doctrinal thinking is especially predominant within military culture, accompanied by the use of models to reflect an intractable reality. In addition, the frequent rotation of military

31 R. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence. Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007) 67.

32 G. Mitchell, 'Team B Intelligence Coups', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 92, No 2 (2006) 144-173.

33 *Report by the Committee investigating decision-making on Iraq* (Davids Committee) (The Hague, 2010) 318.

34 M. Handel (ed.), *Intelligence and Military Operations* (London, Routledge, 1990) 25.

35 M. Phythian (red.), *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle* (New York, Routledge, 2013) 21; S. Marrin, 'Intelligence Analysis and Decision-making', in: P. Gill et al. (ed.), *Intelligence Theory. Key Questions and Debates* (New York, Routledge, 2009) 133.

36 See, inter alia, G. Evans, 'Rethinking Military Intelligence Failure - Putting the Wheels Back on the Intelligence Cycle', *Defence Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2009) 22-46; A Hulnick, 'What's wrong with the Intelligence Cycle', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (2006) 959-979; G. Eriksson, 'A theoretical reframing of the intelligence-policy relation', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2018) 553-561; Marrin, 'Why strategic analysis has limited influence'.

37 *Joint Doctrine Publicatie 2. Inlichtingen* (The Hague, Ministry of Defence, 2012) 48.



personnel means that specific knowledge and experience are difficult to retain within military intelligence organisations. In order to safeguard this knowledge and to adequately transfer it to new employees, models like the intelligence cycle are useful. Nevertheless, interpreting complex relationships such as those between intelligence producers and clients in terms of simplified models such as the intelligence cycle does not contribute to a deeper understanding of this relationship. Alternatives such as the 'web of intelligence' proposed by Gill and Phythian, which acknowledges the multiple complex interactions between various points such as targeting, collection and analysis, may be more appropriate for this.<sup>38</sup>

The Janus-faced nature of military organisations also influences the impact that intelligence analyses have on decision-making. In the spectrum from 'hot' to 'cold' intelligence, decision-makers are generally more receptive to 'hot' intelligence, such as operational-tactical intelligence that requires an immediate decision, or intelligence that directly contributes to decision-making regarding military deployment. 'Cold' intelligence, such as strategic intelligence analyses focusing on the long term, is generally more likely to be disregarded because it does not require immediate action. Officers often only gain experience with strategic intelligence on the 'client side' once they reach higher ranks.<sup>39</sup> This lack of experience with 'cold' intelligence could be a reason why military decision-makers are often more receptive to the 'hotter' end of the spectrum. This is also described by Handel, who points out that generals sometimes tend to apply their experience and methods for working with tactical-operational intelligence to the strategic intelligence domain, which requires a different way of working.<sup>40</sup> This is problematic because a lack of experience with the higher levels of operational and strategic intelligence

can lead to intelligence failures if this intelligence is not used effectively.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to investigate, on the basis of three sacred cows, the extent to which the usual way of thinking about the intelligence producer-client relationship also persists in the military intelligence domain. Firstly, it emerges that due to various characteristics of military organisations, the intelligence producer-client relationship is more complex and layered than is generally recognised in intelligence literature. As a result, the dichotomy between producers and clients that can be found in both the traditional and the activist approaches may be less applicable to the military intelligence domain. While the narrative often outlines this relationship in the context of separate roles and tasks, a representation of this relationship in more overlapping and layered roles could contribute to a deeper understanding of the networked and multi-faceted nature of the intelligence producer-client relationship in the military domain.

Secondly, the high degree of institutional embedding could make military intelligence organisations more susceptible to direct or indirect pressure to modify intelligence analyses to conform to decision-making. However, a lack of empirical data makes it impossible for the time being to make unequivocal statements about this. The pursuit of analytic objectivity, which is seen as a way of remaining free from influence, may be more prevalent in military organisations because of the Jominian preferences of these organisations, which could result in an unattainable pursuit of absolute objectivity and 'absolute truth'. For a more effective use of intelligence products, it may be preferable to instead embrace values such as honesty and a 'call it as you see it' policy, which are in line with military values and would therefore fit in well with a military intelligence organisation.

Thirdly, consumers of military intelligence products are also not always receptive to the

38 Phythian, *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle*, 34.

39 Wolfberg, 'When generals consume intelligence', 460.

40 Handel, *Intelligence and Military Operations*, 26.

41 Handel, *Intelligence and Military Operations*; Wolfberg, 'When generals consume intelligence', 460.



*Decision-makers are generally more receptive to 'hot' intelligence, such as operational-tactical intelligence, that requires an immediate decision*

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intelligence they receive, which can lead to frustration on both sides. A better understanding of the intelligence producer-client relationship, for example by means of the 'web of intelligence' or the Janus-face principle, could contribute to an improved understanding of how intelligence contributes to decision-making.

It can therefore be said that the military intelligence producer-client relationship requires different considerations and perspectives than the civilian intelligence process. Empirical research is needed to achieve a better and deeper understanding of these processes in a military context. ■