

The Enduring Importance of the Humanities in the Work of Intelligence

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Intelligence analysts must increasingly reckon with ideas, histories, languages, and geographical claims dormant in the Cold War but now resurgent. National security needs a humanities comeback.

These are challenging times for the intelligence profession. The promise of an “end of history” has yielded to new transnational threats, assertive regional and global competitors, and doubts about the ability of the United States to influence the international system it shaped in the last century. Beneath this roiling surface, key states such as China, India, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are working out fundamental political and cultural orientations. They are adopting selectively the West’s culture of science, individualism, and materialism while reviving earlier views of civilization and national identity. Intelligence analysts must increasingly reckon with ideas, histories, languages, and geographical claims dormant in the Cold War but now resurgent. National security needs a humanities comeback.

The humanities are analytic prisms through which US adversaries see their own interests. Shortly after NATO reiterated in June 2021 that “Ukraine would become a member of the Alliance,” Russian President Vladimir Putin replied in detailed historical terms. He not only repeated his claim that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” but anchored his lengthy personal assessment in the language and religion of the ninth-century Kievan Rus state.

However tendentious some may find Putin’s reading of history, it has defined Russian interests and motivated Russian action in Ukraine. Similarly, the backwaters of Islamic jurisprudence that justify and motivate, for some, acts of extremism are understandable mainly through the study of philosophy, history, and religion in Islamic civilization.

In the wider Middle East, the humanities have returned as a necessary tool for assessing the region’s internal dynamics since the upheavals in governance that began with the US invasion of Iraq. Intelligence efforts on the region have come face to face with a kaleidoscope of competing social groups and identities whose assessment demands more than the contributions of technical collection and data algorithms. Within and beyond the Arab world, the geographic determinants of persistent and ancient political communities, Islam’s fractious intellectual history, Iran’s self-perception as a regional and cultural leader, and Turkey’s enduring pattern of vacillation between Europe and the Middle East are among the strategically relevant issues accessible primarily through the humanities.

Analysts are well prepared—especially because of the intelligence reforms of recent years—to understand and communicate to policymakers the surface forces of a changing world.

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Security threats, weapons capabilities, economic forces, refugees, public opinion, and transnational trends such as cyber, terrorism, and climate change are well suited to data rich collection systems and an improved analytic process that emphasizes logical argumentation and evidence.

Analysts are much less prepared for the civilizational and ideological terrain of the coming era of global competition because the necessary toolkit of the humanities is in eclipse. The physical and social sciences—along with STEM—dominate the academy, students demand money-making degrees, and ideas of critical theory increasingly taint what is left of humanistic learning with the distortions of political power pursuits. The national security risk is that we have an analytic talent pool insufficient for the analytic mission at hand.

An analytic workforce that privileges large datasets, nods to the academy's deconstruction of the content of humanistic learning, and accepts empiricism as the preferred form of knowledge will fail to understand a world whose actors take the content of the humanities more seriously than the United States does. Ideas, values, history, and language are at the core of strategic analysis because these define interests and motivate actions globally. Russia and China insist on the role of civilization in their strategic competition with the United States. Religious identity infuses politics globally. Ancient patterns and precedents echo

in decisionmaking across the Middle East and South Asia.

We have been here before. The development of US strategic intelligence analysis capabilities in the mid-twentieth century was anchored in the humanities. Founding practitioners such as William Langer and Sherman Kent were historians, confident that knowledge of world history, languages, and cultures was essential to the analytic mission supporting US national security. This deference toward the humanities was well suited for the political and ideological competition with the Soviet Union and rested upon a then still dominant position of the humanities in US and European universities.

The waning of humanities in the strategic analytic mission has been decades in the making. First came rapid scientific advances and an academic shift toward the study of economic efficiency and material progress amid the rise of market-oriented neoliberalism. Innovations in intelligence collection that increased the quantity of information to be analyzed further shaped intelligence as an immediate and mostly empirical knowledge mission. The ascendancy of postmodernism within the humanities beginning in the late 1960s also led to an assault on reason and objective truth—the bedrock of the intelligence analysis enterprise. Yet, religion, national identity, historic memory, and struggles over the principles of social compacts are the

global norms which strategic analysis must engage—and a traditional focus of the humanities.

The way CIA thinks about its analytic mission has also mirrored the declining fortunes of the humanities. In the mid-1970s, Director of Central Intelligence William Colby assailed the ivory tower that CIA's Office of National Estimates, led by Kent the historian, had become.^a Colby created a new model of customer-driven intelligence, establishing national intelligence officers to engage more closely with senior policymakers, yielding some of the formulation of strategic intelligence questions to the immediate needs of consumers. Neoliberalism's market reach into intelligence gathered pace in the mid-1990s with the CIA's rebranding of the president as "the first customer."

The decline of the traditional humanities disciplines is changing the pool of applicants for the intelligence analysis profession, privileging STEM, social science, and physical science degrees. The atomization of knowledge and a bias toward material measures and efficiencies leave potential hires ill-equipped to manage the value and culture questions associated with foreign leaders and their political communities. These actors draw on history, religion, language, and literature in their policies and aspirations. The current preoccupation of many in the humanities with Marxist-inspired ideas, among others, of critical theory is well suited for specialists in the arcane veins of Western thought and those with political programs. Such perspectives, however, offer little that can provide policymakers with objective

a. John H. Hedley, "The Evolution of Intelligence Analysis." In *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*, edited by Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (Georgetown University Press, 2008), 28.

understanding of foreign actors to empower US national security policies.

The AI revolution is bringing the humanities deficit in the IC to a tipping point. Key questions about how expertise in AI, data science, and humanities will collaborate on the vast, increasingly digitized, and diverse corpus of humanistic thinking require urgent and innovative planning. The humanities cannot be taught “on the job” so will need to be understood as a key component of the human capital needed to do strategic analysis. The patterns and precedents of history, philosophy, language, and literature will never offer pinpoint linear predictions of the strategic intent and trajectory of foreign leaders and societies but can give policymakers ways to think more usefully about the range of plausible futures facing US allies and strategic rivals. These patterns can also drive innovative collection and analysis across the IC.

A rebirth of the study of the humanities is needed for national security in order to discern and express the interaction of our values and purposes with those of other peoples. The more traditional humanities

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are fundamentally tied to national security because language, philosophical inquiry, and history have durable and discernible meanings that shape culture and politics globally. Analysts who are skilled in the substantive knowledge of the humanities and have the ability to convert their insights into the strategic analytic mission will be essential.

Humanities and Intelligence

The humanities constitute the study of human value and meaning in the context of culture and society. *Britannica’s* definition of the field includes the “study of all languages and literatures, the arts, history, and philosophy” using methods “derived from an appreciation of human values and of the unique ability of the human spirit to express itself.” During the Renaissance, the humanities defined itself as in contradistinction to the divine knowledge claimed by the medieval church, but today the humanities include the study of religion in human culture and society.

The human experience is central to the field. Knowledge that is beyond the scope of the physical and biological sciences is the purview of the humanities. Particulars, unlike in the scientific method, do not matter for their ability to establish a general law but are worth studying on their own for the human meaning and purpose expressed. The social sciences also focus on human culture and society but differ from the humanities in applying more objective methods of inquiry and analysis.

Such a definition of the humanities has implications for intelligence. Individual leaders, groups, and whole societies subjectively and over time define their interests and culture through language, literature, the arts, history and philosophy and can choose to act according to their particular traditions. The humanities offer no predictive determinism in foreign affairs, but they can aid in assessing the range of an actor’s strategic intent and in enhancing intelligence collection.



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