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The Social Ties that Bind: Unraveling the Role of Trust in International Intelligence Cooperation

Abstract: International cooperation between intelligence services poses a dilemma. It is an important tool in countering today’s complex transnational threats, but at the same time, cooperation is a risky business. Intelligence services can never be sure that a partner will reciprocate in kind. Scholars and practitioners often identify trust as one of the foremost conditions to

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overcome this dilemma. Yet the notion of trust is seldomly conceptualized in these rational-calculative explanations. Contrary to the common view that intelligence services are exceptional in their opportunism and rivalry, social relations and trustworthiness perceptions provide a more dominant explanation for the level of cooperation between intelligence partners than is often assumed by scholars and practitioners. Known reputations, recognized professional standards, and shared traits socially bind intelligence professionals to their community of practice, enabling them to bridge divides like nationality and even conflicting interests. Intelligence services resemble many other organizations in the public and private domains, requiring a de-exceptionalization of their international cooperation.

Often characterized as sinister, the realm of intelligence is instead perhaps the most human of all aspects of government and consists to a large degree of personal relationships. The universal currency is trust.¹

Scholarly interest in the mechanism of international intelligence cooperation continues to increase.² Ever since the start of this increasing interest, in the wake of 11 September 2001, scholars have tended to approach it from a perspective of competition and rivalry. They suggest that cooperation is counterintuitive to intelligence services that only cooperate out of necessity when they feel unable to counter a threat or lack information and resources. When examining the conditions under which international intelligence cooperation takes place, many of these scholars stress the difficulties in this particular field. They focus on Machiavellian constructs such as power and hierarchy or highlight functional restraints on cooperative behavior.³ Recently, a small group of scholars has started to advocate for a more sociological perspective. They take a relational approach, some even suggesting that intelligence services come close to an international brotherhood.⁴ In many of these publications, trust is mentioned as an important facilitator for cooperation. As stated in the opening quote, Richard Aldrich even sees trust as the universal currency in the intelligence domain. In a similar fashion, former director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Sir David Omand, recognizes mutual trustworthiness “as the most valuable attribute of any successful [intelligence] partnership.”⁵

Despite its importance, we know little about the underlying conditions shaping trust among services and intelligence personnel. Trust has hardly been conceptualized in relation to intelligence studies.⁶ This runs the risk of the debate on international intelligence cooperation getting stuck in oversimplified dichotomies like “friends *or* foes,” “collaboration *or* competition,” and “trust *or* distrust.” This article argues that these dichotomies contribute to the

mystification of the intelligence profession, but are not very helpful in understanding the nuanced workings of international intelligence cooperation. Without conceptualization, the notion of trust only becomes a clincher rather than an analytical tool.

This article critically examines trust and the underlying perceptions of trustworthiness, and systematically unravels their role in international intelligence cooperation. It first outlines international intelligence cooperation and focuses on the dilemma of cooperation: intelligence organizations often cooperate without being able to rationally calculate their outcome or control the risks involved. Subsequently, the article introduces the role of trust in dealing with this dilemma. Finally, it conceptualizes trust in international intelligence cooperation, identifying the importance of perceptions of trustworthiness and its three conditions: organizational image, organizational culture, and organizational identity. The article demystifies international intelligence cooperation, showing that the role of social relations and trustworthiness perceptions in this activity is much more common than practitioners and scholars have often advocated so far.

DILEMMA OF INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION

The Reciprocal Benefits of Cooperation

Cooperation, in this article defined as “working together for mutual benefit,” is commonplace between organizations, in business, and in public administration, as well as in intelligence. It involves a form of collective action; two or more actors that interact or coordinate their actions. Cooperation between organizations helps them achieve “promotively interdependent goals.”⁷ Goals that, once reached by one of the participants, have beneficial effects for all. International intelligence cooperation can take many forms. Although most publications on intelligence cooperation focus on information sharing, it can encompass exchanges (sharing), coordination, and coproduction (collaboration); can occur in all phases of the intelligence process; and includes supportive functionalities such as liaison. It covers both formal and informal arrangements in bilateral and multilateral settings.⁸ Moreover, it can include knowledge circulation, meant for professional advancement. Mai’a Davis Cross uses such a perspective when examining whether or not the European Union Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) can be seen as an epistemic community, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that this is not the case.⁹

In intelligence, the appeal of international cooperation is relatively straightforward; two can simply achieve more than one. Cooperation is rewarding, as it increases resources and adds valuable expertise. It is widely suggested that cooperation is an essential capability for intelligence services,

helping them to face a highly complex and demanding security environment.¹⁰ On the one hand, the current threats are increasingly transnational and nonstate. Instead of being adversaries, national services now often win or lose together. On the other hand, notwithstanding their competitive nature, intelligence services need each other to fulfill their national tasking. Alone, not even the joint effort of all U.S. intelligence services, presumably one of the largest and technically most advanced intelligence communities in the world, will be sufficient to deal with the diverse and interdependent range of security threats facing them. For this reason, when confronted with the need for regional intelligence on the Afghan–Pakistan border in their War on Terror, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cooperated with a variety of partners. It represented “a cost-effective way of increasing Human Intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities” by trading information from the technical collection for “local expertise and resources, expensive to acquire and difficult to maintain.”¹¹

Cooperation is distinct from pure altruism. Whereas both concepts encompass a form of helping others, altruistic behavior usually implies doing so regardless, or in spite of, the cost this action befalls oneself.¹² Cooperation, although it inflicts costs, ultimately refers to the achievement of a shared aim. Although there is some evidence that people tend to be altruistic by nature, unconditional altruism is quite rare between organizations or states. This does not mean that altruistic features are absent in international intelligence cooperation. Especially in long-standing arrangements between organizations with a history of social interaction, “feelings of interpersonal attachment, sympathy or relational commitment” may very well influence the establishment or maintenance of cooperative behavior.¹³ For example, Hager Ben Jaffel’s work on Counter-Terrorism and Extremism Liaison Officers in Anglo-French cooperation shows that intelligence liaison officers can be a successful personal bridge between different systems and uphold perceptions of trustworthiness.¹⁴ Nevertheless, on closer inspection, many apparently altruistic forms of exchange are in fact based on expected benefits in the future.¹⁵

Expectations of reciprocity are at the heart of international intelligence cooperation. Intelligence services will behave cooperatively based on the expectation that their partner will do the same in return. This cooperative behavior appears easy when it confers direct benefits on all participants in achieving a common goal. The well-known adage of *Quid pro Quo* (QPQ) in international intelligence cooperation represents this simple, mutually beneficial exchange. Yet when the contributions of both partners differ in quality or quantity, or when a return is not (immediately) guaranteed, this mutualism is asymmetric and imposes relative costs on one of the partners. Many, if not most, forms of international intelligence cooperation constitute

postponed and asymmetric arrangements. These arrangements are based not on direct QPQ, but on the more indirect *Do ut Des* principle; to give with the expectation of receiving a return in the future.¹⁶ Conferring a benefit to another with an expectation of, but not an immediate, return is prominent in cooperation.¹⁷ This can be qualified as a risky business.

THE RISK OF NOT BEING REWARDED

A much-quoted adage on international intelligence cooperation is that intelligence services have no friends.¹⁸ In this view, intelligence is a harsh and goal-driven activity aimed at a competitive advantage for national decisionmakers. As a result, intelligence services constantly strive to outsmart their opponents. In many cases, intelligence services are even perceived as rivals.¹⁹ Instead of only “wanting to be first,” actions are aimed at damaging the rival itself.²⁰ This striving was clearly evident in the fierce (counter)intelligence battle fought between opposing Eastern and Western services during the Cold War. Yet in a weaker form it can be seen elsewhere as well. It is common knowledge that intelligence services of relatively close allies also spy on each other for strategic and economic purposes. For example, French and American intelligence services are known to have been spying on each other’s economic activities for years.²¹

Competition between services seems to be at odds with cooperation. Seeking a competitive advantage, intelligence services are inclined to pursue relative gain for themselves rather than absolute gain for all. Information and knowledge are seen as commodities and treated as property; hard to acquire, precious to poses, and valuable to trade.²² As a consequence, secrecy, autonomy, and “a culture of wanting to be first” are important obstacles to intelligence cooperation.²³ Moreover, given the secrecy in methods, the uncertainty of results, and the difficulties in assessing the objective value of information, one can seldomly be sure that a partner will be returning the favor in kind. Defection is hard to detect, especially in the case of information sharing and might be committed totally unwillingly. For example, the way fabricated single-source intelligence on the alleged Iraqi biological weapons program found its way through German services to uncritical U.S. decisionmakers in the period 2000 to 2002 shows the serious vulnerability attached to international intelligence cooperation, even in dealing with reliable partners.²⁴

Following the logic of competitive advantage, international intelligence cooperation is a beneficial activity that increases capacity. However, it also seems uninviting, as defection by partners is tempting and relatively easy. Intelligence services, therefore, appear to have no choice other than to discount a partner’s deliberations and to each pursue their own short-term selfish gain. Some even claim that intelligence services are characterized by a

particular organizational culture of distrust, in which “risks of sharing information [...], by any rational calculation, far outweigh the potential benefits.”²⁵ The larger the number of partners included in an arrangement, the greater is that risk. As benefits of cooperation are indivisible and nonexcludable, sharing with many, by definition, means putting aside ambitions of exclusive gain.²⁶ In addition, more participants mean that it becomes harder to assess the origin of information and make it increasingly difficult to monitor whether or not everyone is contributing. Free-riding, behaving selfishly by parasitizing on the cooperative efforts of others, is a strong temptation in multilateral intelligence cooperation.²⁷ Moreover, the risk of defection is multiplied in these larger groups. The chances of a group member putting to use the intelligence in a manner not agreed on—or even leaking it to a third, nonparticipating, partner—seem omnipresent.

Intelligence services, trying to minimize risk and maximize their own cost–benefit ratio, tend to shirk full collaboration (e.g., by only sharing second-class information).²⁸ This will prevent them from reaping the full potential benefits of cooperation. Unwillingly, and apparently, unavoidably, they reach a suboptimal equilibrium.²⁹ This cooperation dilemma is by no means exclusive to the field of intelligence.³⁰ Similar problems have been noted in many fields, between organizations as diverse as American, Japanese, and Korean car producers; between Polish tourist firms; and among Italian healthcare institutions.³¹ Despite their differences, these organizations share a situation of interdependence where a noncooperative course of action is tempting (as it yields superior, often short-term, outcomes), but if all pursue this noncooperative course of action, all are worse off than if they had cooperated fully. From these cases it becomes clear that organizations can circumvent these difficulties, managing to cooperate despite a degree of conflicting interest, being competitive and cooperative at the same time.

OVERCOMING THE DILEMMA

Trying to Reduce the Risk: Rational Calculations and Control

Scholars struggle to understand the conditions under which cooperation is chosen as the preferred strategy. After all, it “entails the risk that others will not reciprocate, leaving the co-operator in the unrewarding position of being exploited.”³² Two distinct agent-based models, or operating mechanisms, can be discerned for achieving cooperative behavior; the mechanism of rational calculations and the mechanism of social relations.³³ Both mechanisms are ways to deal with uncertainty about a partner’s behavior. The first mechanism sticks closely to the dominant cost–benefit approach in intelligence. From this perspective, the most obvious way to increase

cooperation is to ensure a partner's returns. That is, to decrease the risk that a partner will defect unexpectedly. In this mechanism, rational calculations can lead to cooperative behavior when they are sufficiently reliable. The degree of control exercised over the exchange empowers this mechanism. Introducing control as an insurance against defection, for example by using contractual safeguards, aims to bring together expectations of reciprocity and actual outcomes.

Control as a condition for cooperative behavior under circumstances of distrust is a well-known concept in publications on international intelligence cooperation. Especially the concept of hierarchy, introduced by James Igoe Walsh, often figures as a condition for cooperative behavior between intelligence services. A strong hierarchy between partners can ensure partner compliance as one service has extensive power over the other. It allows the dominant partner to directly manage and oversee the other's intelligence process.³⁴ As these minor partners are forced into obedience of the wishes of the principal, the chances of them violating expectations are minimized. These expectations can concern the expected outcomes, or include the way these outcomes are reached. The deferential position of the Ministry for State Security (STASI) in relation to the State Committee for Security (KGB) during the Cold War is an example of such a strong hierarchy, part of an "imperial intelligence system centered on the KGB Centre in Moscow." At some point, the first was seen to serve the interests of the latter completely, even keeping a check on their own government for them.³⁵ Nevertheless, in international intelligence cooperation, these absolute one-sided relations are rare. The junior partner in many cases is able to hold on or gain a degree of self-determination, lessening the control of the principal partner.³⁶ For example, whereas the former Dutch Domestic Security Service BVD (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst) was seen to accept considerable financial backing from the CIA during the early years of the Cold War, the first was never a "timid partner" in that relationship, sometimes even flatly turning down requests or proposals by the latter.³⁷ Likewise, although the United States appeared to have bought-in profound influence in the Ethiopian intelligence service in the period from 2000 to 2010, the latter managed to exercise substantial leverage in that asymmetric relationship.³⁸

However inviting as the mechanism of rational calculations and control is for the competitive world of intelligence, it has practical flaws with regard to cooperation. First, the presumption of rationality implies that intelligence services are able to fully grasp the indirect and asymmetric cost and benefits of cooperation and adjust their behavior accordingly. Yet, in practice, this rationality is limited. Social interaction is seen to be affected by incomplete information, cognitive biases, imperfect memory, and an inability to fully analyze the complexities of the environment.³⁹ Subsequently, the calculation

is virtually impossible and acting on its presumption counterproductive. Constantly “asking how well you are doing compared to others is not a good standard [for behavior] unless your goal is to destroy the other player.”⁴⁰ Cooperative arrangements need room for uncertainty, interpretation, and error. “Being nice,” at least applying a “somewhat forgiving” tit-for-tat-strategy, greatly helps successful and sustained cooperation.⁴¹ Second, seeking control always comes at a cost for the intelligence services involved. To control an exchange relation, it is necessary to dedicate valuable resources in obtaining information not only on targets but on partners as well. Distinguishing among partners and remembering which ones have delivered in the past requires costly and detailed bookkeeping about one’s partners, for example by External Relations branches.⁴² Moreover, getting close to a partner in cooperation requires costly counterintelligence and security measures.⁴³ These measures have to prevent a partner exploiting his privileged position beyond the scope of the agreement or even providing dubious intelligence. In practice, it is hard to imagine a situation in which an intelligence service can have total control over a partner and the environment in which the cooperation takes place. It appears that rational calculations and control alone are insufficient as an explanation for efficient or sustained intelligence cooperation.

ACCEPTING VULNERABILITY: SOCIAL RELATIONS AND TRUST

Models of rational calculations do not perform well in situations of greater complexity where their predictions are “repeatedly shown to be empirically false.”⁴⁴ In these situations, uncertainty is a key characteristic of the interaction and exchange. As a consequence, cooperative behavior always involves a degree of vulnerability.⁴⁵ Intelligence systems, with their many participants interacting interdependently at different levels and in different settings simultaneously, qualify as situations of greater complexity.⁴⁶ Based on rational calculative considerations alone, international intelligence cooperation is thus fragile and can even be seen to “drive up distrust and defensive positioning, even among relatively close allies.”⁴⁷ Rationality is unable to mitigate the risk of being (unpleasantly) surprised. To explain durable cooperation between intelligence services, a more resilient mechanism is needed. One that enables participants in the cooperation to expect reciprocity and “rely on each other, despite the presence of uncertainty and risks of partner opportunism and misappropriation.”⁴⁸ Social relations provide such a mechanism.

Like rational calculations, the mechanism of social relations can invoke cooperative behavior. It helps partners achieve reasonable expectations about each other. Yet social relations do so on an entirely different basis. They can lead to cooperative behavior when partners accept to be vulnerable in their

dealings with a specific counterpart or exchange network. This mechanism thus operates in a far simpler and more efficient way than with rational calculations, as it dodges the need for hard-to-achieve rational prediction and costly objective control measures like monitoring and sanctioning. Social relations are embedded in subjective beliefs and perceptions that enable quick interpretation of a situation and guide the appropriate behavior.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, these beliefs and perceptions are more than mere emotion or intuition. They are an “active sediment of [the] past that functions within [the] present” and reflect best practices for fulfilling expectations of reciprocity.⁵⁰ In many, if not most, cases international intelligence cooperation does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it a one-shot “all-or-nothing” exchange. Intelligence services interact not once, but frequently, and they do so in various settings and arrangements. These arrangements open new possibilities for cooperative behavior. Repeated interaction not only increases the number of chances for reciprocity, it enables a relation; taking a partner’s character and behavior into account when deciding how to act. Studying the guiding beliefs and perceptions of exchange partners or the interdependent network can help explain how cooperation works and develops in these settings.⁵¹

Trust is generally accepted as a central belief conditioning social relations in cooperation.⁵² Interorganizational relations rely heavily on trust, especially in diffuse multilateral settings and among organizations operating in secret.⁵³ On a micro level, repeated interaction can lead to the development of particular trust between people. This can serve as a “ratchet” for cooperative behavior. On a macro level, repeated patterns of successful behavior can in turn lead to a more generalized form of trust between groups, “slow to emerge and decay.”⁵⁴ The existence or absence of trust is one of the overarching themes in the literature on international intelligence cooperation. Numerous articles name trust as one of the most important determinants of cooperative behavior in the competitive world of intelligence.⁵⁵ They point at the importance of “trust in, and respect for, other agencies” as foremost when deciding on the extent of intelligence-sharing arrangements.⁵⁶ Peter Gill, for example, finds mutual trust the premise on which “the whole structure of intelligence cooperation is built.”⁵⁷ Most take a pessimistic stance though, emphasizing the limitations on cooperation caused by a lack of trust between the partners.⁵⁸ Moreover, despite its importance, the notion of trust remains a very murky concept within studies on international intelligence cooperation. Notwithstanding some notable exceptions like Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé’s recent article on the role of trust in UN intelligence, it has seldomly been defined or conceptualized.⁵⁹

TRUST IN INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION

Trust between intelligence services is a form of interorganizational trust, a much-studied concept in sociology and interorganizational relations. It is commonly defined as the extent to which members of one organization hold a collective trust orientation toward one another.⁶⁰ Based on various authoritative publications, this study defines trust as “the intentional and behavioral suspension of vulnerability by a trustor on the basis of positive expectations of a trustee.”⁶¹ It is seen to hold three dimensions. First, it involves a decision to act in relational exchange. Without the possibility of action, the trust would degrade to mere hope. Second, it involves a degree of vulnerability. Trust enables actors to suspend their vulnerability, not because they are not aware of being vulnerable, but because they believe that their partner will not (overly) exploit this situation. It involves the trustors’ belief that their trustees have a responsibility, or even an obligation, to fulfill the trust placed in them. Third, the good reasons underlying these beliefs are based on subjective perceptions of a partner’s trustworthiness. Contrary to predictive confidence, trust is not about knowing but about interpreting.⁶² It requires a “leap of faith.”

From a sociological perspective, the perception of trustworthiness is fundamental for trust and therefore the key determinant of cooperative behavior.⁶³ Trust is nothing in or by itself. Whereas many psychological studies at the interpersonal level focus on the individual trust propensity, at the organizational level trust is not considered “trait-like” or unidirectional.⁶⁴ In cooperation, trust is based on the belief that a partner will do the right thing. It is relational and reciprocal, requiring interaction with the partner to evolve. Although trustors can begin trusting relationships by a willingness to be vulnerable, it is “trustees [who] determine the success of these relationships.”⁶⁵ Moreover, trust works in two ways. The roles of trustor and trustee rest simultaneously with both partners. For a positive expectation of behavior, partners both look at each other’s characteristics and interpret why the other would be worthy of trust. This can be the case in particular relations between people or organizations but can concern the trustworthiness of the network as a whole as well. Reciprocal trustworthiness creates a complex system of interdependent relations where “your own behavior is echoed back to you.”⁶⁶

Trustworthiness is spelled out by scholars in a variety of ways. Despite their differences, most include three related conditions for partner trustworthiness.⁶⁷ First, partners need to perceive each other as being capable of fulfilling the expectations placed on them. Knowing a partner’s competencies is paramount in this, both in achieving operational results and in building and sustaining effective cooperative ties. This is largely cognitive. Second, partners need to perceive each other as possessing integrity.

Recognizing a partner's standards as acceptable is regarded as a strong indication that their behavior will not include unpleasant surprises and that their frame of reference will be understandable. This is largely normative. Third, partners need to perceive each other as benevolent. Having similar attitudes is seen to produce a form of goodwill toward a partner, caring for his welfare and encapsulating his interests. This is mainly effective. From a sociological perspective, the conditions for trustworthiness are "larger than the participants who are in them," based on perceptions of what a collective must be able to achieve, how this ought to be done, and what it stands for.⁶⁸ These conditions are often studied in terms of perceived organizational image, culture, and identity. They are seen to work separately, as well as in conjunction, to determine the intensity of cooperation based on trusted relations.⁶⁹ From this perspective, intelligence services work together best when they know, recognize, and value each other.

Organizational Image

The first condition for trustworthiness is for partners to hold a favorable image of the other. A durable organizational image in a network, or reputation, is the result of an aggregated process that evolves over time. It refers to a partner's ability to accomplish the specific task at hand effectively, and in cooperation with others.⁷⁰ Valuations of numerous individual encounters, on different levels and in varying circumstances, lead to more generalized views about the partner organization as a whole and are transmitted to others. In intelligence, reputation can influence the level of cooperation. Signals intelligence (SIGINT) cooperation between Axis partners Germany and Finland flourished up to and during World War II, as the Germans held Finnish codebreakers at large in high esteem. At the same time, cooperation with the Italians was limited as German officers held the Italians in contempt and qualified them as "temperamentally unfit for serious crypto analysis."⁷¹ More recently, the United Nations (UN)'s reputation for poor information security and lacking professional intelligence standards was found to discourage partners from sharing information, like in the case of the UN Mission to Mali.⁷²

A positive reputation is based on previous successful cooperation and helps future cooperation. It is useful, as it attracts other partners or helps to maintain ties with current ones. Organizations with good reputations in a network are seen to be committed to cooperation and unlikely to behave opportunistically, as the latter would destroy their advantageous position. Moreover, as the use of their good reputation is dependent on the network, they tend not only to uphold trustworthiness themselves but also between themselves and others.⁷³ The effect of reputations on continued cooperation, both on an organizational and a personal level, can be seen in many

professional fields where uncertainty and complexity are common, and where there is some competition, like in the case of expertise-sharing networks between firms.⁷⁴ It is also present in those cases where (law) enforcement is absent among a variety of anonymous actors with doubtful intentions, like in the dubious example of the crypto market for illegal drugs.⁷⁵

Knowing a partner's reputation requires a basic familiarity with their "professional skills, competencies, and characteristics."⁷⁶ Direct feedback, either from own experience or in a network, can foster perceptions of trustworthiness between professionals as they provide a proof of ability that is otherwise difficult to observe.⁷⁷ For example, in the case of multilateral intelligence cooperation like in NATO, "some good-natured naming and shaming" can counter free-riding behavior.⁷⁸ Likewise, intelligence services can achieve or maintain a good reputation by directly communicating themselves about their ability to cooperate successfully. A possible case of such direct signaling could be seen in 2018 when the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service openly communicated about a successful counterintelligence operation against Russian spies allegedly trying to breach into the systems of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. This rare public statement of operational results by an intelligence service was made alongside British and American partners, making it clear that international cooperation had been crucial for the result achieved. Put this way, it signaled not only their competence in counterintelligence to a broad audience, but made visible their normally unobservable traits as a trustworthy ally as well.⁷⁹ Yet these direct forms of communication are rare and, in many cases, direct experience is simply lacking. In these cases, a judgment of ability needs to be based on reputational information that is transmitted indirectly. Jonathan N. Brown and Alex Farrington find that, in international intelligence cooperation, gossip reinforces relational bonds.⁸⁰

Functional divides between services can be the cause of insufficient familiarity, conflicting principles, and incompatible traits, setting the stage for lacking mutual understanding, hampering interoperability, controversy, conflict, and sometimes even rivalries.⁸¹ Yet, at the same time, the intelligence field provides ample opportunity for partners to get familiarized and exchange reputational information. Its patchwork of connections holds numerous interactions in which members of intelligence services come together, in various settings and at various levels. Interagency personal contacts are fostered in collective education, regular meetings, and standardized communications. Together, they create a diverse network of relations between key officials that can be an underpinning for trust.⁸² In this manner, the periodical meetings of European heads of Domestic Services in the Club de Berne formed an invaluable fundament for later operational counterterrorism cooperation in Europe.⁸³ Likewise, the regular encounters

between numerous heads of services in NATO's military intelligence committee, and the equivalent body organized by the EU's military staff, can provide fertile ground for operational cooperation. Although perhaps too large a setting to offer direct operational opportunities, they can be of service in "the mutual confidence and understanding and the personal friendships they bring."⁸⁴ The importance of personal ties between senior executives of partnering firms for cooperation is well known in the field of business cooperation. For example, in the Taiwanese travel industry personal ties are often the start of horizontal strategic alliances.⁸⁵ When allowed to communicate face to face with each other, many of them are likely, over time, to develop affective ties, based on the likeability of exchange partners, their similar attitudes, and their perceived skills. This effect rubs off on the partner's organization as a whole.

Organizational Culture

The second condition for trustworthiness is for partners to recognize each other's organizational culture, playing the game by clear rules. Organizational culture is associated with integrity, based on a shared system of meaning and similar, or at least acceptable, behavioral norms and values. They provide a generalized set of principles for sensemaking that "influences all aspects of how an organization deals with its primary purpose, its various environments, and its internal operations."⁸⁶ Moreover, they reflect what members in an organization find appropriate behavior in a given situation. For cooperation between organizations, a degree of "value congruence" or "cultural fit" is needed as it limits uncertainty to a predictable and acceptable range of behaviors.⁸⁷ Partners will be "most comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable in situations where different assumptions operate because [they] will either not understand what is going on, or, worse, [...] will misperceive and misinterpreted the actions of others."⁸⁸ In practice, these assumptions are seldomly articulated and "so taken for granted" that group members will simply find any other premise inconceivable. For example, although cooperating competitors in the very formalized and controlled industry of Polish aviation seldomly identified organizational culture as the leading factor or reason for their cooperation, many implicitly mentioned dissimilarities in norms, standards, and ethics as barriers to sustained relationships.⁸⁹

Many networks have occupational cultures that span the different organizations within them. The intelligence community of practice can offer common standards that reflect the beliefs and values in this occupation and enable recognition of a partner's professional integrity. This espoused institutional framework is a practical reflection of the guiding values and assumptions in the community. Professional standards show the norm on

“what is right or wrong, what will work or what will not work.” They are often explicitly and repeatedly being articulated to guide members in their behavior, especially when confronted with uncertainty. Although they are sometimes reflected informal rules, these social institutions⁹⁰ are informal, and often intangible, frames, part of a durable and recognized pattern of shared practices in a societal group.⁹¹ George Simmel notes that organizations culturally defined by their ordination to be secret, display social restraint and formality to the outside world, mirrored by informality and lack of control on the inside.⁹² Moreover, the Intelligence Community (IC) is seen to “harbor deeply embedded institutional and cultural legacies, preferences and biases that favor time-tested tradecraft and practices that they perceive to be the global gold standard.”⁹³ Adhering to established principles, like “need-to-know,” “third-party-rule,” or “originator-control,” can be powerful binding institutions.⁹⁴ Culture is considered “one of the most significant relational properties of security networks.”⁹⁵ On the other hand, differences in professional cultures are seen to be the cause of significant communications problems and conflict, for example in alliances between U.S. pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms. Fundamental differences between their engineering and science cultures on how knowledge is understood and used, leading to diverging normative ideas on principles like research centralization, negatively hampered alliance performance.⁹⁶

When partners are being seen to reject or violate some of the professional standards in a community, this will damage their perceived trustworthiness. Anna-Katherine Staser McGill and David Philip Harry Gray find that diverging moral standards (or perceptions thereof) on issues like personal data protection and the treatment of suspected terrorists formed obstacles to cooperation between the United States and some of its partners.⁹⁷ Yet what the professional standards are, and which of them carry the most weight, depends on the specific (sub)community of practice, the circumstances at hand, and the backgrounds of the organizations involved. The value of timeliness as a professional intelligence standard gains prominence under circumstances of imminent threat but could be less prominent in strategic intelligence. Similarly, although mendacity is considered a faux pas in the relationship between intelligence services and their political masters or oversight bodies, it can be perfectly acceptable behavior in the IC itself. A degree of mendacity is even likely to be considered the norm in the secretive world of intelligence, even in the relation between cooperating intelligence services. In 2013, it became apparent that the British GCHQ had breached the infrastructure of the Belgian telecommunications provider Belgacom to use it for their own advantage. The Belgian services were reported not to be involved or notified. The Belgian oversight committee concluded that, at the international level, this meant that trust had taken a blow. They considered it

“[no longer clear] who can be considered to be friendly services.” Yet, at the organizational level, the Belgian General Intelligence and Security Service pointed out that “reverting to isolationism would not be the right response” and that cooperation had to be maintained.⁹⁸ Pragmatism, in this case accepting to be competing and cooperating at the same time, might well be another professional standard in the IC.

In cooperation, maintaining a common professional baseline for interaction is helpful in preserving some order and expectation of reciprocity between partners, even in the face of deep fault lines. Moreover, from these common standards, organizations can subsequently develop shared institutions together that enhance perceived trustworthiness.⁹⁹ In the field of intelligence, a normative baseline to support cooperation can be found in shared professional language and *modus operandi*, like a compatible view of the intelligence cycle, shared technical expertise, a standardized lexicon of qualifying words, or agreeable definitions of intelligence topics.¹⁰⁰ The value of shared technical expertise and practices as a baseline for cooperation can be seen in the development of the MAXIMATOR alliance; a European arrangement for SIGINT cooperation reported on by Bart Jacobs. Not only was admittance to the arrangement based on “close personal ties and a shared high level of technical and cryptanalytical skills,” but in the course of its existence, restrictive behavior between its participants eased.¹⁰¹ Didier Bigo labels such cross-border communities of practice in the fields of security and intelligence as “transnational guilds.” Their shared worldview, vested in practical outings like lifestyle, (body) language, and symbols and shored by similar background and socialization, is what distinguishes them from others and binds them together.¹⁰² Professional recognition allows existing intelligence partnerships to develop incrementally from the grassroots up.¹⁰³ Adam Svendsen even notes “something close to international standardization” when describing homogenization in the increasingly globalized IC.¹⁰⁴

Organizational Identity

The third and final condition for trustworthiness is for partners to possess a shared organizational identity. It refers to how partners perceive and understand who they are and what they stand for as an organization. A collective organizational identity alleviates the fear of a partner’s potentially opportunistic behavior in strategic networks.¹⁰⁵ In intelligence, Daniel Byman names conflicting sense of purpose as an important barrier to cooperation between services that are primarily focused on regime survival and those that derive their *raison d’être* from supporting decision making in foreign affairs or defense.¹⁰⁶ Social identification, on the other hand, produces benevolence; wanting to do a partner good aside from an egocentric profit motive. This positive assortment distinguishes in-groups, where

partners feel attached and care for each other's welfare, from out-groups, where this is less the case. Moreover, it implies a sociological merging, a sense of "we" instead of "you and I," ascribing "group-defining characteristics to the self, and to take the collective's interest to heart."¹⁰⁷ In extremis, continuing the relationship becomes as important as its outcome.

Feelings of shared identity produce affective ties and attachment that go beyond mere cognition and normative concerns. They are a powerful basis for cooperative behavior. Actors with identical attributes or statuses are seen to form increasingly frequent relationships, compared with those who do not perceive to share characteristics. This tendency of similarity-attraction is also known as the notion of "homophily" in social networks. Experiences in homogenous groups tend to be perceived as less demanding, more agreeable, and more efficient (although not necessarily more effective). In interorganizational relations, patterns of homophily, comfortably sticking to what is known, are remarkably robust.¹⁰⁸ Joseph Soeters and Irina Goldenberg note that in information sharing, people "have a tendency to connect to others who are like them."¹⁰⁹ This can have an inbreeding tendency as well; awareness of an in-group, once found, reinforces awareness of out-groups and leads to intergroup biases.¹¹⁰ In secret societies, secrecy and the pretense of secrecy are social means for distinguishing from others, signaling superiority, and "building the wall higher."¹¹¹ Intelligence services can be seen to have "a sense of being special," deriving a common identity from their specific purpose in national security, their exquisite collection mandates, and the secrecy this involves.¹¹²

Attachment means that partners see each other as the "object of belonging and commitment, [sufficient] to [...] create meaningful relationships." It requires partners to value each other's identity as (part of) their own. This valuation is supported by categorization and comparison, grouping the identity of oneself and others into a series of social categories. Not only are these categories believed to hold information on what can reasonably be expected from a partner, when partners are perceived to be very similar, but interests also become encapsulated.¹¹³ The U.S.–UK intelligence relationship, the backbone of the five-eyes community, provides an example of such encapsulated interest. The enduring belief "in defending the freedom of democracies" is considered a powerful foundational value. This shared sense of purpose and consciously fostering "a culture of cooperation" that is "handed on from generation to generation" sustains cooperation.¹¹⁴ In its 70-year existence, despite occasional strategic and operational differences, the partnership proved remarkably resilient.¹¹⁵ Acknowledging the importance of a shared identity for collaboration, several European countries have recently launched Intelligence College Europe. Its primary aim is not operational exchange, but enhancing a common strategic culture and common

understanding within the European IC.¹¹⁶ It builds on the idea that in the field of European intelligence integration can serve as a stepping stone for cooperation.¹¹⁷

A collective identity is the result of the repeated activities of a diverse set of organizations, the emergence of clear patterns of interaction, mutual awareness of participants that they are in a common enterprise, and, eventually, a degree of homogenization. This process is seen in many upcoming industries as well as in more established and enduring alliances. For example, in the case of the American artisanal beer craft industry, identification with traditional production methods first served as a way to contrast (and compete) with large-scale companies like Budweiser, but later became more of a “special way of life” and gradually evolved into a collective trait of character. In the end, cooperation, even between competing firms, had become a core value of what was perceived as a tight-knit community with a collective identity and common sense of purpose.¹¹⁸ For international cooperation and public administration, similar processes in international bureaucracies have received considerable scholarly attention.¹¹⁹ For intelligence, Helene L. Boatner points at the “shifting notion of allegiance” with national personnel working in large and long-lived multinational organizations.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, although social identification can enable people to bridge organizational and national divides, previous identities are seldomly relinquished entirely. In practice, cooperative arrangements are seen to preserve a dynamic set of multiple subidentities that together form the collective identity and shape cooperative behavior.¹²¹

Perceptions of a shared organizational identity and feelings of professional attachment are not beholden to formal structures. In fact, they may grow within any “system of cooperative effort and coordinated activities,” such as a workgroup, profession, or “other ensemble of individuals in more frequent social interaction than with others.”¹²² Informal communities of practice, based on “daily, routinized, or patterned production and the extent of shared value, interest, and habit,” are seen to develop a sense of belonging, shared identity, and goodwill toward other members that enables them to cooperate and derive resources on the basis of a generalized expectation of reciprocity for that group.¹²³ In intelligence, small informal clubs can provide a platform for identification and trust-based cooperation. For example, the Counter Terrorism Group provides an intimate and closed locus for cooperation between organizations, centered around a certain shared purpose and common understanding. They operate through a notion of “shared secrecy,” where information is exchanged between this small group of participants while being selectively shared with others like EUROPOL and EU INTCEN.¹²⁴ Their informality and the decentralized character of these communities do not imply anarchy and ineffectiveness. On the contrary, they

are more likely to be practical reflections of an evolved trust-based relationship that enables a high level of risk acceptance and in-depth cooperation between the members.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the relationship between trust and cooperation in the international field of intelligence practice. It has demonstrated that unraveling trust provides a valuable, complementary perspective on international intelligence cooperation that nuances our understanding of this activity. Rational calculations on (shared) threats, scarcity of information, and potential benefits, as well as control of information, may all be important drivers for collaboration, but they insufficiently explain efficient and sustained international intelligence cooperation. The mechanism of social relations and trust, based on perceptions of trustworthiness about (a specific set of) partners, enables organizations to cooperate despite the uncertainty and vulnerability inherently present in the process. The conditions for perceived trustworthiness that are known from publications on interorganizational relations are found applicable to the “special,” secretive world of intelligence as well.

Cooperation on the basis of social relations seems rare in the international intelligence arena. Trust may be considered important, but intelligence services are seldomly thought of as holding one, shared identity, or encapsulating each other’s interests. Many institutional divides exist between them—national, functional, and structural. However, on closer inspection, the intelligence community of practice offers a basis for social identification and trust that can bridge the many conflicting fault lines. Known reputations recognized professional standards, and shared traits socially bind intelligence professionals to their community of practice, allowing them to bridge divides like nationality and even conflicting interests. Moreover, social relations include sources of nonmaterial reciprocity that can be just as important for competitive advantage as material gain. In practice, services and their professionals often cooperate in long-standing arrangements without being able to rationally calculate the outcome or control the risks involved.

By departing from a purely material approach, a more nuanced understanding of cooperative intelligence arrangements comes within reach. Intangible social relations enable partners to cooperate despite the vulnerabilities attached, even allowing them to be simultaneously competitive and cooperative. By conceptually unraveling trust into components of perceived trustworthiness, it becomes possible to study this phenomenon in-depth and examine the role it plays in achieving reasoned expectations in cooperation. From this perspective, particular traits of the IC that are often mentioned as obstacles to cooperation, like pragmatism, secrecy, and informality, can very well be the ties that bind in this diverse community of

practice, bolstering social identification. From this perspective, if intelligence services were to have any friends, these would probably be other intelligence services.

Social relations and perceived trustworthiness provide a dominant explanation for cooperative behavior in intelligence. The mechanism behind international cooperation between intelligence agencies is thus much more common than scholars and practitioners themselves tend to suggest. Their practical art differs, and therefore the exact setting and valuation of trust, but conceptually their interaction resembles relations between organizations and professionals in other domains. Trust between them is buttressed by personal relations, evolves over time, and can be sustained despite a degree of competition. We may need to demystify international intelligence cooperation. As a result, using sociological approaches like social network analysis and social psychology for structured analysis of intelligence practice is clearly beneficial to our understanding of international intelligence cooperation. More detailed empirical research into the social dynamics of international intelligence cooperation in specific arrangements, like larger international fusion cells or small informal clubs, would further enhance our knowledge of its workings.

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