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Félix Sanz Roldán

OPINION AND INTELLIGENCE

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OPINION AND INTELLIGENCE

Abstract:

Opinion and intelligence are almost antithetical terms for those responsible for providing the Government with sufficient information for the strategic decision-making process. In this context, it is essential to be aware of the difference between information and intelligence and the role played by the intelligence cycle and analysis. The intelligence work requires sources as close as possible to the origin of the information. It is also important for the citizens to know that, in order to fulfil its tasks, an Intelligence Service always operates within the framework of a series of goals previously set by the Executive.

Keywords:

Intelligence, opinion, information, intelligence cycle, think-tanks, media, decision making, strategic security.

***NOTE:** The respective authors are responsible for the ideas contained in the *Opinion Documents*, which do not necessarily express the opinion of the IEEE or of the Ministry of Defence.

A few weeks ago, in a meeting of a Scientific Council, I was very surprised by the poor understanding shown, by some of our companies' and universities' leading personalities, of the role played by Intelligence Agencies and, in particular, of the work carried out by the Spanish National Intelligence Centre (CNI). I have to acknowledge that my surprise was not entirely justified, as I myself wasn't completely aware of the difficult role played by Intelligence Service Agencies in the current complex world as I took over the direction of the CNI after more than 40 years of service in the defence and security field.

This is the reason why I wish to clarify certain misunderstandings that hinder the [upright](#) comprehension of the task we carry out, that is without breaking the discretion owed to the mission that was entrusted to us. As will be seen, the issues I wish to clarify focus on one single fundamental problem: the thorny relation between opinion and intelligence in a society that demands immediate real-time trials for each and every one of the events that occur and all of this in a global world where everything is interconnected.

The first misunderstanding is the result of considering information and intelligence to be the same thing. The writer John Naisbitt has defined, quite wisely, the situation in which we find ourselves with a remark that has become famous: "We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge". The media are capable of offering us at present large quantities of information of the most remote places and with the uttermost immediacy. Policy institutes, known as think tanks, draw up rigorous reports from a thorough data collection. In both cases we are talking about very valuable information that should be conveniently evaluated and clarified if it is to be used in a decision-making process. Information is just the starting point of the so-called intelligence cycle. Therefore, to start working, both the intelligence informer and analyst start off with the same information. However, taking into account that each of them employ different approaches, tools and acting principles and also that each of our organizations have different objectives and are directed to different audiences, both processes' final products – intelligence information and analysis– barely have anything in common.

Intelligence's added value is not measured by its capacity for anticipating news, but by the specialized knowledge it provides, which is based in the use of sources and procedures only available to us. Considering that the final user of such knowledge is the one that must adopt strategic decisions that affect national security in its broader meaning, the CNI can't afford to simply give its opinion nor can it permit its analysts to let their imagination loose and be original in their judgments.

Intelligence work demands disposal of sources as near as possible to the origin of the information, but also to discern between and contrast a great amount of data in order to finally evaluate said data, bearing in mind that the end product offered to the recipient is of high importance, as it may be crucial and will incline him towards a line of action instead of others he had been considering until then. This is why carrying out such work implies a high level of engagement in which opinion must never prevail over evidence. To sum up, if we are uncertain, we leave it out.

At this point we encounter another of the misunderstandings that generally hinders the comprehension of what is done in the CNI. The institution I lead is not a free radical. It is not we who decide what we deal with and, of course, we do not work for our own benefit, nor do we ever use shortcuts to stretch the bounds of legality. The CNI always carries out its work in the framework of objectives previously set out by the Government. Our main job is to obtain information which, conveniently treated, sieved and transformed into intelligence, is transmitted to the State authorities for them to be able to make the strategic decisions that affect our security, values and interests with the smallest possible degree of uncertainty.

Therefore, our mission is very different from the one that inspires the media or the policy institutes in the same way that our direct recipients are different from theirs. The media and the think tanks are addressed to the whole of society, whereas the CNI is addressed to the Government of the Nation. Even though our Intelligence Reports are addressed to the Executive Power, those who finally benefit from the activities carried out

by the CNI are the Spanish citizens because we work from our service vocation for their security, in order to guarantee a space for State and citizens to develop free from risks or threats.

This is exactly why it is so important that the citizens understand the aim and mission of the CNI. Those who know me are aware of the fact that I have always dedicated a large part of my time –just as I did when I was Defence Chief – to explaining to different audiences –from nursery school to our country’s business élite– the missions and characteristics of the organization I lead.

In short, one must be known first in order to be acknowledged, and to be known we must explain and open ourselves to the society we serve with patriotic sentiment and a deep desire to be useful. In my public interventions, I usually say that Intelligence Services must be more of a secret than they are a service. I hope this article has contributed to shed a little more light on the essence of our service, a service that is carried out daily by men and women of the CNI. I also trust that this electronic publication of the IEEE (Spanish Strategic Studies Institute) will have a long and fruitful existence.

Félix Sanz Roldán

State Secretary and Director of the Spanish National Intelligence Center (CNI)