



Intelligence Sharing: An Interview with James Igoe Walsh

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Distinguished political science Professor James Igoe Walsh sheds light on the arcane world of intelligence sharing in international politics.

Q. In international politics, what is meant by “intelligence” and “intelligence sharing”?

Intelligence sharing means that countries provide others with intelligence they possess. Countries frequently share information with each other, as well as other actors such as international organizations. Intelligence, in this context, can be thought of as a particular type of information—secret information. It is secret in two ways. First, the “target” of intelligence collection is trying to prevent others from finding this information—think of North Korea hiding nuclear materials underground to prevent detection by the international community. Second, the state collecting the intelligence often uses “sources and methods”, such as agents or technology, that it wishes to keep secret so that the target cannot take counter-measures to more effectively shield its activities.

This secret dimension makes sharing intelligence a highly political process. A state “sending” intelligence wants to be sure that the recipient will not divulge the intelligence or sources and methods to the target. And the recipient typically cannot independently verify whether the accuracy and completeness of the intelligence shared with it.

Q. When countries decide to engage in intelligence sharing, what are the necessary conditions that normally need to be met for parties to enter into a

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relationship? Do some factors outweigh others?

States are willing to share intelligence when they are confident the recipient will not divulge it. Recipients value intelligence when they are confident that it is accurate.

One condition under which senders and recipients can overcome these concerns is when they trust each other to handle intelligence securely and to only share accurate intelligence. Trust is fostered when the countries have shared interests. This is one reason why intelligence sharing between the United States and United Kingdom is so robust—the two countries have broadly common foreign policy interests.

Q. For states participating in intelligence sharing arrangements, there seems to be a need for them to balance the benefits of obtaining valuable intelligence against the risks that their partners will withhold or distort the information they share or, deliberately or inadvertently, give information to others. There is also the pitfall that shared human intelligence or communications data will be used to conduct, or inadvertently enable the practice of, unethical and unlawful activities. How can states effectively overcome these risks, if at all?

In fact, there are many cases in which countries whose interests are less aligned have shared intelligence. This suggests that trust is one, but not the only, mechanism that underpins sharing. A good example is intelligence sharing between the United States and West Germany in the early Cold War period. While these two countries would later develop a strong alliance and share intelligence frequently, at the beginning of the Cold War the United States had serious concerns about the Federal Republic's trustworthiness, fearing that it

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might try to strike a deal with the Soviet Union to reunify the country, and that its government and security services were riddled with spies that would pass American intelligence to the Eastern bloc.

At the same time, West Germany was a potentially valuable intelligence partner for the United States. The two countries overcame this mistrust by creating what I term in my book *International Politics of Intelligence Sharing* a “hierarchical” relationship that made the United States the dominant partner. The United States funded most German intelligence activities and seconding personnel to work as staff in the west German intelligence service. This allowed it to closely monitor its German counterpart, and to threaten to withdraw support should German intelligence act in ways contrary to the United States’ interests. In my book, I find that the United States formed many such hierarchical relationships with countries deemed less than trustworthy but that could provide valuable intelligence—ranging from South Vietnam in the 1960s to countries in the Middle East in the last two decades.

Q. It was recently the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The events of that day have often been described as intelligence failures. How did 9/11 effect intelligence communities and intelligence sharing relationships?

The 9/11 attacks had two broad consequences for intelligence sharing. First, they strengthened shared interests in fighting terrorism, especially after countries such as the United Kingdom and Spain were also targeted by Islamist terrorists. Intelligence agencies around the world redoubled their efforts to share intelligence on terrorist threats.

Second, they shifted the balance of power in intelligence sharing arrangements away from the United States. After 9/11, the United States had a desperate

need for intelligence, especially “human” intelligence collected by spies and agents, from around the world. This put countries with access to such intelligence in a stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States. They could now demand concessions on other issues—arms sales, economic support, and ignoring human rights abuses—in exchange for the now more valuable intelligence they could provide to the United States.

Q. There have been several events in what has been dubbed the “big data” era, such as the Snowden and Manning leaks, where an intelligence “insider” has broken the promise of secrecy. Are insider threats inevitable and if so how can the potential damage done by leaking be limited?

Insider threats have, of course, always existed. As discussed above, for example, the United States worried that Soviet bloc spies working in governments in Europe and elsewhere would gain access to American intelligence and share it with their handlers. Similar concerns have arisen in American counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen.

The big data era aggravates insider threats in two ways. First, insiders have access to much more intelligence than did their predecessors in the typewriter era. Chelsea Manning, for example, copied hundreds of thousands of documents from multiple American intelligence agencies to CD-ROMs.

Second, insider threats are most problematic in countries that rely most heavily on big data. Snowden and Manning leaked intelligence from the United States, the country with the most data-intensive intelligence collection and analysis agencies. This means that countries that share intelligence with the United States are particularly concerned that its focus on data collection makes it vulnerable to leaking of secrets that they provide.

Governments typically respond to such leaks by limiting access to intelligence, for example limiting and tracking the data and intelligence that analysts can review. This is not a free lunch, though. One of the criticisms of United States intelligence agencies before the 9/11 attacks was that they hoarded the intelligence they collected and would not share it with their counterparts in other American agencies. One danger of limiting access to intelligence data is that it will make it more difficult for analysts to “connect the dots,” putting together disparate types of intelligence collected by different agencies to generate a more comprehensive picture of their rival’s goals, capabilities, and intentions.

Q. For a variety of reasons, the rise of populism in Europe and North America, particularly figures like Trump, has been described by some as a threat to intelligence communities and intelligence sharing relationships. What effect will populism’s rise have on intelligence sharing in the long term? Are matters as bad as some make out?

President Trump in particular has taken actions that might lead other countries to conclude his administration cannot be trusted with sensitive intelligence they share with the United States. In the best-known example, during a White House meeting with Russian government officials, President Trump passed along intelligence shared with the United States by Israel. President Trump has a highly conflictual relationship with the United States intelligence community, largely over its handling of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and of possible cooperation between the Trump campaign and Russian agents. This conflict may make other countries reluctant to share intelligence with their American counterparts.

One concern they may have is that valuable intelligence they share with the United States may not be treated securely. Recall as well that countries often share intelligence, especially with a powerful country such as the United States, to secure concessions on other issues or to influence American policy decisions. If these countries conclude that the relationship between President Trump and the American intelligence community is fundamentally broken, they may see few opportunities to exchange intelligence they possess for concessions or influence.

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About the Interviewee



James Igoe Walsh is associate professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and author of *European Monetary Integration and Domestic Politics*. His research interests include the military and political consequences of advanced weapons, links between natural resources and conflict, and intelligence and national security. His work has been supported by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of

*Homeland Security, the National Science Foundation, and the Minerva Research Initiative. Dr. Walsh is the author of *The International Politics of Intelligence Sharing*, published by Columbia University Press, New York, and was named an Outstanding Title by Choice. Dr. Walsh holds a Ph.D. in international relations from American University.*

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