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A Comprehensive  
Reference

edited by  
Bob de Graaff

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# 1

## Intelligence Communities in Asia

*Bob de Graaff*

**It has become a cliché to say that the practice of intelligence** has existed in all places and at all times. However, the first written evidence of it is found in Asia. Three sources are mentioned in almost all world histories of espionage and intelligence: Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, and the Old Testament. Stemming from hundreds of years before the common era, all three showed the importance of intelligence as part of statecraft and warfare. Today we live in what some have called the Asian Century, in which power is shifting Eastward. Western countries have reason to gather intelligence on these economic, political, and military power shifts, as well as on the nuclear capabilities or ambitions of some of the Asian nations. (The People's Republic of China, India, and Russia are among the largest countries in the world in terms of size and population.) In the opposite direction, Asian powers spy on the West in order to leap forward economically or to learn more about the West's strategic plans. The nations that are called the chief culprits of espionage and cyber attacks against the West are all in Asia: Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.<sup>1</sup> In early 2019, Daniel Coats, then head of the US intelligence community, pointed to Russia, China, and North Korea as the main threats to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Others in the Trump administration, which sees itself confronted with the return of big power competition, would hastily add Iran.

Some of Asia's intelligence organizations, such as Israel's Mossad, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, China's Ministry of State Security, India's Research and Analysis Wing, and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, figure repeatedly in lists of the top ten intelligence agencies in

**Figure 1.1** Map of Asia and the Middle East

the world. Eight out of ten of the countries thought most likely to start a major military conflict are in Asia: China, India, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and Turkey. Major areas of tension are also to be found on this continent: Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, the Philippines, Syria, Yemen, and the South China Sea. Both Russia and China are running major influence campaigns in the West. Russia's meddling with elections in the United States and other nations is well known. Meanwhile China is buying up media outlets and training foreign journalists to "tell the China story well."<sup>3</sup>

Some of Asia's security services have a longtime reputation for internal repression. China seems to have reached a new stage with its electronic surveillance and facial recognition of citizens and the associated social credit system, which has become an export product to other countries with repressive regimes in Africa, Latin America, and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally there has also been much intelligence gathering between neighboring Asian countries, for example between India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan, North and South Korea, or Israel and its neighbors. And many of the Asian nations have either been the victim or supporter of major terrorist or insurgent movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Taliban.

Despite all this, very little has been published on intelligence in Asian nations, with the exception of Russia, Israel, and wartime Japan.<sup>5</sup> And what has been published about Asian intelligence is often hardly known outside the countries of origin. India has developed a certain tradition of intelligence memoirs that outshines that of many European nations.<sup>6</sup> However, these memoirs have not found their way into mainstream intelligence studies. If intelligence scholars in continental Europe already have reason to complain that the cultures and practices of their nations' intelligence communities are hardly recognizable in the intelligence literature as it is dominated by the Anglosphere,<sup>7</sup> scholars and practitioners of Asian intelligence have even more reason to do so. What has been written about intelligence in Asia is mainly about China, India, Israel, and Russia. However, even in the case of China it is true what Xuezhi Guo writes in his book about China's security state: "few institutions have received as much weight but as little weighty analysis as China's security and intelligence agencies."<sup>8</sup>

Fundamentally different from the situation in Europe though is the fact that scholars of intelligence practices in Asian nations often do not stem from the countries of their expertise. While trying to find an author for one of the nations that in the end did not make it into this volume, I received emails from different potential authors stating that they would not risk going to jail because of writing a contribution to this book.

This is a sad illustration of the undemocratic situation in which many of the intelligence organizations and some of their scholars in Asia operate. Of course, this is not true for all Asian nations. This divide between intelligence agencies working in democratic and those in authoritarian, if not totalitarian, settings is probably the most fundamental factor when it comes to describing the workings and cultures of national intelligence communities. And there are more differences between the Asian nations described in this volume. Some of them are rather small, like Israel, and some of them are big, like China, the latter covering a surface more than 430 times that of Israel, with a population over 150 times as big as that of Israel. Such differences may be mirrored in the ways countries organize their intelligence and security services. Some countries may feel global responsibilities, like Russia and increasingly China, while others, like Myanmar or Bangladesh, are mainly orientated toward their own region. In some cases this region is rather benign, while in others intelligence serves as a kind of more or less continuous proxy warfare with one's neighbors. Some countries had to shed a colonial legacy, also in the fields of intelligence and security, whereas others, like Iran, Thailand, and Japan, were never colonized,

and still others remained sovereign only to a certain degree due to their victimization to imperialism, such as China.

All these and many more differences pose a challenge when one wants to look for transnational commonalities in Asian intelligence. One could question whether it is more or less possible than in the case of Europe to see such commonalities. The different contributions to this book can therefore be seen not only as presenting national cases in their own right but also as building blocks for a more general idea of non-Western and specifically Asian intelligence. In order to make such comparisons possible, I started looking for authors for as many of the approximately fifty nations that constitute the Asian continent as possible. I realized that the task of identifying appropriate authors for the individual countries would be daunting. From the start it was clear that not all the countries of the continent could be included. Covering fifty nations across North, East, Central, South, and Southeast Asia and the Middle East would certainly exceed the magnanimity that could reasonably be expected from a publisher. Ultimately a selection was made based upon considerations of both relevance and practicality, leading to a total of twenty-three countries, including Middle Eastern countries located in Asia—Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen—and, according to a broader definition of the region, also Afghanistan and Pakistan. Because this selection came about partly by chance, it was decided to present the different contributions in alphabetical order by country.

I offered the authors a set of criteria, asking all to provide:

1. A description of the country's past and current security threats.
2. The history of a country's intelligence community, in principle starting somewhere around 1945.
3. Special attention to two or three remarkable or characteristic highlights (or lows) from this history.
4. The current structure of the intelligence community and its mission.
5. The status of international cooperation.
6. The way accountability is organized (both internal control and external oversight).

Furthermore, by way of inspiration, the authors were able to familiarize themselves with Rob Johnston's taxonomy of the characteristics of intelligence communities.<sup>9</sup>

They were asked to treat a country's intelligence community as a whole, including both civilian and military services. However, in Asia,

economic intelligence, financial intelligence, customs intelligence, and criminal intelligence are often seen as part of this community as well. It was up to the authors then to indicate the case in the countries they describe and also to establish where new types of “ints,” such as cyber-int, are accommodated within the system.

Another intent is to decolonize intelligence studies from the Anglosphere. Maybe, once we know more about other nations’ intelligence structures, the most common type of intelligence organization will be found outside that of the US intelligence community, which apparently still sets the pattern for others. The broadening of the number of countries outside the Anglosphere with the Asian countries described in this book may offer another possibility to see which systems in the end are more common or more unique. This issue will be addressed more elaborately in the concluding chapter of this volume, where arguments in support of a special type of Asian intelligence will be brought to the fore.

The case of Asia raises the question of to what extent postcolonial states in Asia have managed to shed the colonial intelligence and security legacy. After all, legislation and personnel were to a certain extent inherited from the colonial administrators. Through the different contributions to this volume the reader will see how and when this legacy began to fade away, if at all, with variations in this fading being another differentiating factor between the diverse countries. Therefore authors examine whether lasting special relationships with the former colonial powers remain or whether the former colonial relationship is a hindrance to benign bilateral relations. Other questions concern the influence of the Cold War on the intelligence apparatus in Asia. Some countries show a certain renationalization or realignment after the end of the Cold War as part of a change from a bipolar to a multipolar international system. An example would be the tensions that arose between Japan and South Korea in 2019, leading to a suspension of military intelligence sharing between the two countries. For others, like North Korea, much remained the same. And other countries found possibilities for international cooperation that had been unthinkable during the Cold War, such as in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or within the framework of the common fight against the threat of a new type of terrorism. Intelligence services also had to adapt to the growing number of humanitarian interventions and peace support operations after the end of the Cold War. Further, intelligence systems in locations such as Afghanistan and Iraq were affected by the needs of the intervening United States, let alone Syria, which became an international arena not only for the local belligerents



and foreign fighters who flocked to the area from around the world but also for all the major regional and global powers, including their intelligence and security services.

Western talk of Asian cultures has often been tainted with Orientalism. Security arrangements have generally been painted as characteristic of “Asian brutalism.” If this is not a cultural trait, then there should be other explanations for the fact that issues of intelligence can often not be discussed freely in the respective countries. To a certain extent this has led to writing about Asian intelligence systems from an outsider’s perspective. This volume could not solve this problem and it remains to be seen when Asia will be able to decolonize itself in this regard.

In intelligence literature, it is sometimes claimed that the origins, so-called intelligence traumas, and founding fathers have a lasting influence on the mindset and working processes of intelligence organizations. In the United States the trauma of Pearl Harbor stamped the lookout of the intelligence communities to a very large extent; in Germany the historical bequest of both Nazi and Stasi (Ministry for State Security) practices has determined the maneuvering space of today’s services in that country. The memory of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), influenced the idea of covert action as a principal intelligence task within the CIA. Reinhard Gehlen, who stood at the cradle of Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst), had an impact on this service long after his retirement. Therefore we seek to know if similar factors can be traced in the case of Asian intelligence organizations or communities. It will be seen that the Japanese intelligence system suffered similar postwar restrictions as the (West German) intelligence community, because of the wartime role of the *Kempeitai*. Some founding fathers had a lasting influence in Asia as well, such as Kang Sheng, who founded the internal security and intelligence apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party, but was expelled posthumously from that party in 1980 because of his role during the Cultural Revolution. In some nations a remarkable situation presented itself in that the modern intelligence organization was established or at least set in motion by a foreigner, like retired German colonel Walter Nicolai in Turkey after he had headed the *Abteilung III* secret service during World War I, or Australian Walter Joseph Cawthorne, who established Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence in between his duties as director of military intelligence at general headquarters in India and as head of the Australian Joint Intelligence Bureau.

One of the dividing lines between intelligence systems is for whom or what the intelligence and security organizations are actually working.

Is it for the current government, the state, the constitution, the people, or the dominant party? This is a fundamental question. Working for the current government may lead to politicization of the services, while working for the state may ironically lead to a degree of independence of the services that makes them states within the state or at least may create the possibility of parallel foreign policies. Despite its importance, it is a question that is often overlooked in Western intelligence studies. Whereas intelligence services in most present-day intelligence literature are assigned the role of policy support, there are indications in Asia that in some cases intelligence organizations formulate and execute policies, at least partially. Think of the rather independent role of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate in Pakistan and the role Israeli intelligence has tended to play in diplomacy and peace processes.

And even without the possibility of working at cross-purposes with national policies, how integrated, coordinated, or centralized are the individual intelligence and security organizations of a nation in a community of intelligence? Some of the contributions in this volume show that in Asia the individual services of a nation compete with each other more than with their opponents from other nations. Foreign intelligence and internal security services may be clearly divided, similar to the bygone demarcation between the British Military Intelligence 5 (MI5) and Military Intelligence 6 (MI6), where a line three miles out from the British coast separated the working spheres of the organizations. In other cases, this distinction may have blurred just as much as it did in the recent past in the West due to cross-border threats arising from cyber, terrorism, transnational crime, climate change, and migration.<sup>10</sup> This raises the question of to what extent it is possible to speak or write of an “intelligence community.” The term is often used as a kind of shorthand for the joint intelligence and security services of a nation, but in many cases it appears that there is little jointness and even less community.

Also, what are the limitations of what constitutes intelligence in Asian nations? It is worth examining not only the range of activities (regional or global) but also whether the concept comprises not only intelligence and counterintelligence but also covert action, parallel diplomacy, and counterterrorism. At least some of the Asian countries show a remarkable dexterity in covert action. Furthermore, some Asian intelligence organizations are not exclusively their nations’ forward-looking early-warning systems; they also look back, as for instance Israel’s Mossad did when it abducted Adolf Eichmann from Argentina in 1960. And to what extent do Asian intelligence organizations fight

terrorism and to what extent do they work hand-in-glove with at least some designated terrorist organizations?

And finally, it would be interesting to see to what extent Asian intelligence organizations have come under public scrutiny. Are they today subject to oversight mechanisms similar to the ones that were established in the West from the 1970s onward? Were major intelligence failures subjected to public investigations? Do the media have a special role in regard to a country's intelligence and security services? Are they a thorn in their flesh or are they their mouthpiece? And if no independent, judicial, or parliamentary oversight exists, is there then executive oversight or control? These are all fundamental questions addressed throughout the chapters, although the reader will have to take into account that the amount of information available about the intelligence systems in various Asian countries may differ. Few of the Asian countries have the freedom-of-information regimes and transparency policies used in the United States and Europe. Some authors were able to master this problem thanks to information from media or inside interviews, but other authors had to rely more on a description of the formal structures or the threat environment. It should not be overlooked that in many cases the contributions are among the first pieces written about the intelligence community of a particular country. Also, for many countries there is a dearth of expert authors.

Thus the question of whether it would be possible to characterize Asian intelligence as different from Western intelligence also presents itself. Readers are encouraged to keep the aforementioned questions in mind and make comparisons of their own regarding "same" and "different" for these intelligence organizations (and others that might also be compared to them) as well as between Asian and Western intelligence. In the book's conclusion, I provide some general impressions and characteristics of Asian intelligence cultures.

This volume will be of use to instructors who take up issues like these in their graduate and undergraduate classrooms in a number of subjects ranging from the social sciences to smaller niches like security studies. Regardless of the actual outcome, this collection should interest both academics working in the fields of intelligence studies and intelligence practitioners who have to understand the way intelligence is carried out in other countries, friendly or not.

With the growing strategic importance of Asia and the rapidly increasing discipline of intelligence studies, it is hoped that this book will have a stimulating effect in the budding field of Asian intelligence studies as well in the field of comparative intelligence studies, leading to more research.

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