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Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli

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Intelligence Diplomacy: Comparative Aspects and The Case of Italy

Prof. Raffaele Marchetti

SUPERVISOR

Valerio Salvatore Puzzo
ID: 105172

CANDIDATE

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Introduction

In carrying out inter-state relations – i.e., the political actions that the governments of a state undertake to shape their position in respect to another one – states have always had as their official performers mainly two actors, namely diplomacy and armed forces. In the ongoing world, however, information has acquired ever increasing and noteworthy weight in the international arena and is continuing to do so. The agency of the actors mentioned is enabled by it and current relations, conflicts and exchanges are characterised by a prominent role of information, use it as a weapon or, in certain cases, even regard it as their main objective. The word "information" refers to the valuable pieces of information necessary to statecraft and state agency to perform their duties and pursue their interests at best – namely, intelligence.

Conducting foreign policy, particularly diplomacy, is normally the task of foreign ministries and embassies abroad. However, it can happen that other actors are called upon to perform diplomatic tasks depending on the circumstances and other variables related to the desired outcome of the issue. Paradiplomacy, which is diplomacy conducted by sub-national administrative levels or non-central governments, or track-II diplomacy, which builds on informal contacts and non-state organisation, are instances suggesting the possibility, for international relations, to deviate from conventional paths. Within the governmental realm, intelligence agencies have often played such role, referred to as "covert diplomacy", besides the conventional one of informing the political decisionmaker. The topic of this dissertation stems from the peculiarity of the diplomatic function of intelligence services, which is something not duly addressed in the already under-theorised field of intelligence studies.

In the first chapter, a comprehensive introduction to intelligence is provided. After a definitional and historical account, the intelligence cycle and the acquisition techniques are expounded. Subsequently, the standing link between intelligence and diplomacy, testified by the information-oriented nature shared by both realms, is presented, also referring to statements, historical evidence and some pieces of literature that have properly acknowledged the phenomenon. The second chapter tries to propose a categorisation of how and why intelligence and diplomacy concretely interact and merge.

This is made by referring to the precious elaboration by John A. Gentry. In his study, he tries to systematise the motivations leading states to choose intelligence as a diplomatic actor and notes the presence of such motivations in several historical occasions. Drawing on his findings, a further attempt to abstraction and categorisation is suggested. In the third chapter, the extent of the phenomenon in Italy is addressed. After a historical and legislative overview of intelligence in Italy, three specific instances of Italian nationals arrested or kidnapped abroad are discussed. This shall be useful as it is an issue that Italy had to face on multiple occasions and that has triggered the activation of its intelligence apparatuses for diplomatic and operational purposes. This discussion also benefits from some insights emerged in an interview with a strategic and intelligence studies professor.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Intelligence

1.1. Setting the Ground

When dealing with intelligence, several distinctions arise as to its constitutive elements – definitions, tasks, objectives, usage and so forth. The issue in this regard is also represented by the fact that, depending on which definition(s), task(s), objective(s), or usage(s) one chooses to highlight, successive findings will assume a different form too, as the conveyed image of intelligence will do. This chapter is thus aimed at delivering a comprehensive review and contextualization of intelligence, functional to the subsequent elaboration.

It Is useful to start with a definitional approach: *what* is intelligence? Multifaceted paths and approaches emerge here, and much confusion on the matter is due to an overlap which is often not properly unfolded. By this term, either the *activity* and the resultant *product*, or the *institution* that performs and/or conveys it can be intended. This word is present both in phrasings such as intelligence collection, cycle or briefing – instances referring to the activity and/or product, which we consider together given their close association; or when speaking of a national intelligence agency, often having the term in its official name, such as Secret Intelligence Service (the British agency commonly known as MI6) – instances of State organisations.

Countless definitions have been given regarding intelligence as an activity and its product; indeed, the most part of the debate concerns that. However, what is common in every definition is the role of *information*. Michael Herman, former GCHQ official turned scholar, starts his elaboration in *Intelligence power in peace and war* (2004) with the assumption that "[g]overnments collect, process and use information", as well as several other organisations, even non-governmental ones, do; he then goes on specifying that information alone is not the key constituent when it comes to governmental use. In fact, in that case intelligence "has particular associations with international relations, defence, national security and secrecy." (Herman, 2004). On the same line, Lyman Kirkpatrick speaks of "the knowledge – and, ideally, the foreknowledge – sought by nations in response to external threats" (Warner, 2002), while Sherman Kent keeps it more general by speaking of "knowledge" that a government gathers in order to realise "national welfare" (Warner, 2002). Interestingly, the definition given by the Central Intelligence Agency (1999) is vague as well: "the knowledge and foreknowledge of the world around us." Among the most comprehensive definitions, the ones by Shulsky and Schmitt (2002) and Lomas (2021) are to be cited. The formers state that "[i]ntelligence refers to information relevant to a government's formulation and implementation of policy to further its national security interests and to deal with threats from actual or potential adversaries", thus maintaining the emphasis on security and threat as the main targets of the practice at stake; the latter argues that "intelligence in its purest sense is the end result of a process of collection and analysis of information, with the final product or 'intelligence' shared to those who need to use it – a process called the 'intelligence cycle'." This formulation concentrates on the process and its outcome, clarifying both on the destination of that product and on the path leading to it.

Michael Warner (2002) interestingly says that the word is "defined anew by each author who addresses it", and the four definitions cited above are an eloquent exemplification of his warning. However, there is a generally wide agreement in the literature as to the core of the matter referring to critical information, acquired by certain methodologies – more precisely, *disciplines* (HUMINT, SIGINT, OSINT etc.) on which there shall be further elaboration later – processed through a certain cycle – the

"intelligence cycle" and consumed or utilised by certain "customers" – state administrations, for the purposes of this analysis, but also businesses, enterprises, or even individuals – who require it. Additionally, it may appear as the above definitions excessively stick to modern times. This is partly true, especially when referring to information collection techniques, many of which imply advanced technological facilities, such as SIGINT or GEOINT, or well-established state apparatuses, such as HUMINT conducted in an intense and persistent way, capabilities available only in modern or even contemporary state forms. This also holds true for the processing cycle, as it implies proper structures, bureaucracies and understandings that have not been always present throughout human social organisations. Yet, when it comes to the core of the matter, which we said to be information, history shows the omnipresence of this factor, allowing one to claim that the beginning of the history of intelligence almost coincides with the conventional one of human history.

1.2. Historical Notes

It is at this point useful to expand on what intelligence has meant in history. A brief account of the role of strategic information in human history is provided in the following section, basing on the conventional, established periodisation commonly adopted by historical scholarship, starting from ancient history and arriving all the way to the 20th century[1]. By this account, it can be shown that information collection, analysis, and utilisation have always been present throughout history. The only things that have changed are the *modalities* of those actions, including their permanent institutionalisation.

1.2.1. Ancient History

Even though the watershed between *pre*history and history – which is what we are concerned with – is based on the invention of writing, considered to be around 3500 BC, the first accounts of what can be considered an embryonic form of intelligence service date back to 4000 BC, when Sumerians adopted an information service within their city-states. This was among the factors allowing the Sumerian people to extend their

[1] The following account draws on the thorough work by T. Saintclaire (2019), *Servizi di Informazione e Sicurezza.*

domination on what is approximately today's Iraq. Espionage was decisive up to the last Sumerian sovereign's rule, Lugalzagesi of Umma, after whom the rebellion led by Sargon of Akkad succeeded in overthrowing the previous regime. The new one also utilised an efficient espionage network operating in neighbouring states and ensuring a lasting ruling. An interesting instance is the one of King Hammurabi of Babylon, whose strategic thought led him to envision the infiltration of selected members of the army into enemies' ones – a primitive instance of military intelligence.

A first evolution can be seen within the Egyptian empire, where provincial governors, merchants and fiscal collectors played a crucial role in conveying information on the Hittites, who represented a tough adversarial power for decades. The Battle of Kadesh represents an insightful case as written evidence is available showing that the Hittites widely used spies and reconnaissance troops infiltrated within the Egyptian army. This had been useful not only for information gathering, but also for *dis*information purposes. The successful outcome of the fight by the Hittites was in fact due also to having managed to urge Pharaoh Ramses II to move the majority of the army towards Kadesh, falsely said to be undefended, which led the Egyptians into a trap.

The relations – mostly not peaceful – between the Persian empire and the Greek people have also been characterized by espionage. The several successes of Cyrus the Great in the Median territory, as well as those of Darius in the East owed much to information-gathering efforts; however, the majority of those efforts were concentrated on the Greek target, as did the opponent in reverse. The invasion of Greece was highly supported by espionage, but the Greek resilience against the several attacks in previous decades also relied on information flowing from the Persian court. Herodotus indeed tells the story of Demaratus of Sparta, a Greek spy inside Xerxes' entourage, who managed to deliver to Sparta a hidden message warning about the imminent invasion. The Peloponnesian War, fought with some interruptions between 431 and 404 BC, saw the utilisation of spies by both parties, Sparta and Athens, but the high fragmentation between diverse city-states considerably hindered what today would be called intelligence sharing, in that case among cities allied with one or the other city. This improved with the empire of Alexander the Great: his extraordinary military and strategic abilities, along with the

wide extension of his dominion and the well-organized administration covering a variety of dominated populations ensured an efficient intelligence capability, allowing for the duration of the realm even after his death.

Moving on to the rising of the Roman civilization, the role of information structures and personnel came to acquiring even more significance. It was after the severe defeats against the Carthaginians that Rome became aware of the importance of preventative knowledge, since the main concern up to that time was about sheer military power through the organisation of the army. In the Republican period two figures were tasked with collecting, more or less informally, information – *publicani* and *negotiatores*. The formers were private individuals who received the public task of tax collectors, while the latter ones were essentially businessmen travelling throughout the provinces of the empire. With the continuous expansion, however, more specialised figures were needed, leading to the creation, within the military, of *speculatores*[2] and *exploratores*[3], with the first ones being proper military units dedicated to intelligence, and the second ones having reconnaissance tasks, both present in standing legions. *Informatores*[4] were also present, resembling undercover agents and tasked with supervising against rebellions and riots. The bureaucratic reform of emperor Diocletian also affected these questions, introducing a better organised espionage system and the so-called *agentes in rebus*[5], all coordinated by a *magister officiorum*[6]. The fall of the Roman empire and the subsequent rise to power of the various barbarian kingdoms were both the cause and consequence of a lesser informational effort, because of the disruption of previous bureaucracy and more interestingly because of the perceived lesser need of knowing the surrounding environment.

1.2.2. Modern and Contemporary Period

That need came to be felt again with the progressive birth of nation-states, after the transitioning period from the later Middle Age to Renaissance. Newly organised states re-

[2] From the Latin verb *speculari* “to observe”.
[3] From the Latin verb *explorare* “to explore”.
[4] From the Latin verb *informare* “to represent”, “to show”.
[5] Literally meaning, in Latin, “those engaged in affairs”.
[6] In Latin, “director of offices”. It was a senior post in Roman bureaucracy.

acknowledged the significance of informative material – military, but also political and economic one. The most remarkable example in this regard is the Republic of Venice. The "Council of Ten" (*Consiglio dei Dieci*), established in 1310, was the administration responsible for safeguarding the institutions of the Republic and internal security. Foreign intelligence, interestingly for this analysis, was instead the duty of *ambassadors*, who in turn utilised paid informants. Subsequently, the "Secretary for ciphers" (*Segretario alle cifre*), responsible for crypted correspondence, was also established. The kingdom of Spain, with Charles V and Philip II, made ample use of both internal – for repression and security purposes – and foreign surveillance – especially against its main rivals, the Ottomans, and the mentioned Republic of Venice. Not surprisingly, the domestic counterpart experienced a growing importance during the decline of the empire, given the increasing risks for monarchical power.

The kingdom of Austria engaged in such activities too, with the creation of the so-called "Black cabinet" tasked with the surveillance of domestic and foreign correspondence as well as with the coordination of foreign espionage efforts, especially targeted at the Ottoman adversary. In 1758, the "Imperial Army General Staff Corps" (*k.u.k. Generalstab*) was created and given the exclusive responsibility for intelligence collection and subsequently the handling of the military *attachés* in embassies. The 1815 Treaty of Vienna represents a significant turning point in that, besides calling for non-interference by diplomats in the host state's affairs, it also overtly condemned espionage (Berridge, 2005). Unsurprisingly, this did not end espionage, rather fostered the establishment of separate intelligence agencies and its independence from the diplomatic service (Stempel, 2010). With the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) and the increased influence of Austria, military intelligence converged into the new *Evidenzbureau*. Established in 1850 and operating up to the end of the First World War – which in turn caused the termination of the Austro-Hungarian empire itself – it played a role in targeting the southern and eastern flanks of the empire, namely the Balkans and Russia, but owed its most important achievements to the close coordination with the diplomatic service and the foreign ministry of the Empire. On the other side, when it came to the Second Italian War of Independence (1859) and the Austro-Prussian War (1866), its outcomes were rather poor.

The case of England is among the most remarkable ones, especially for its future role in intelligence affairs. Going back to 1500s, during the reign of Henry VIII the focus was almost exclusively on internal surveillance against the enemies of the realm and anti-monarchical opposers. But it was under Elizabeth I that a structure resembling a modern intelligence agency was set up, all the more so because of the need to counter Catholicism. Lord Walsingham founded what was called "Her Majesty's Service". This powerful apparatus, abundantly funded by the royal treasury, had a wide net of selected university students eventually sent abroad to acquire cultural, linguistical and general knowledge of a certain country so as to be soon employed as agents. In particular, espionage against Philip II's Spain was successful in acquiring a substantial amount of information on the project of the "Invincibile Armada". The size, influence and capability of English intelligence grew progressively more as the Empire reached a worldwide extension. With such an articulated spy net, the Service was probably the most efficient at that time – and one of the most efficient ones still today.

At the end of the 19th century, the new geopolitical context, marked by an increasing number of crossed alliances and treaties, led almost every state to set up proper agencies devoted to intelligence gathering, starting the bureaucratical structuring and formalization of that practice. Their operativity was influenced and adapted from time to time depending on circumstances. Many successes were earned during the First World War, with effective infiltrations behind the enemy lines. During the Second World War, the impact of the Enigma machine and its deciphering first by Polish mathematicians and later improved by Alan Turing gave SIGINT worldwide notoriety even beyond insiders, showing the abilities of those working at Bletchley Park – centre of the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) and eventually Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), United Kingdom's current SIGINT agency. Achievements were also made through innovations introduced in sabotage, guerrilla and actions beyond enemy lines. But it was within the context of the Cold War that secret services demonstrated their utmost salience. In a confrontation that was forced to remain latent, implicit, constrained – in the end, "cold" – the apparatuses tasked by definition with secrecy became the most valid resources, and indeed played one of the most crucial roles

among international actors – a role which is still to be properly discovered, acknowledged, and analysed by the literature in many respects. It was in those years that the Central Intelligence Agency, the French Directorate-General for External Security (DGSE), or the Israeli Mossad were established, while the British MI6 dates to 1922. In the socialist bloc, the KGB ("Committee for State Security") followed the NKVD ("People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs") after the Second World War, and in the German Democratic Republic surveillance was the duty of the Ministry for State Security (known as the "Stasi"). Interestingly, foreign intelligence was carried out by the Main Directorate for Reconnaissance (*Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*, HV A), which was not a separate agency but simply a directorate of the Stasi, showing the recurrent overlap between foreign and domestic intelligence in non-democratic states. This was the same for KGB and its First Chief Directorate, tasked with foreign collection.

Today, nearly every state having the size and possibility to establish such services has done so. A typical configuration in modern states entails a foreign intelligence service, a domestic security service, almost always a military intelligence service and one or several specialised agencies depending on the needs, organisational culture and capabilities of that state. The permanent institutionalisation of these agencies has brought them into the interactional dynamics that every state administration must face, often leading to tensions and frictions but more often to cooperation and complementarity. This account shows at the same time the role that information relevant to decision-making – be it political, military, economic etc. – has always had in any form of organised human community, even the more rudimental ones; and how its collection and elaboration evolved in parallel with the growing bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of intelligence within state machinery. Intelligence went from being an almost exclusively military-related matter, reporting to military administrations, to what has been defined "a multipurpose institution with an ever-increasing mandate to meet the needs of a changing international system" (Raje, 2019). Complementarity and "multipurpose-ness" are visible when looking at the tasks performed and the procedures governing these tasks. The influence and contribution of other actors of state machinery, mostly diplomacy, are inserted in this dynamic and shape some parts of the intelligence activity. For example, when agencies work at the research plan on behalf of the government, contextual insights provided by the diplomatic

service can contribute to its drafting. The following section elaborates on how intelligence performs its tasks also by referring at these dynamics.

1.3. The Intelligence Cycle and Acquisition Techniques

In this section an overview of the techniques and disciplines utilised for intelligence collection, framed into the wider intelligence cycle, is provided. There is still some debate ongoing regarding the effective number of phases in the cycle and the effective (sub)categorisation of certain collection techniques, but there is agreement on the principal elements of both. Despite the inextricable link between the two – for instance, the techniques are part of a specific phase of the cycle, the acquisition one – they shall be treated separately for clarity purposes[7].

1.3.1. Phases and Objectives of the Intelligence Cycle

Collecting, analysing, and using information crucial for the national interest – a common denominator in the literature when it comes to the definition of intelligence – must follow an organised path. According to the doctrine, the phases develop as follows.

Planning Phase

In this first phase, the directive organs decide and refine the target of information research (indeed it is sometimes referred to also as "planning *and targeting* phase") on the basis of the requests and needs expressed by policymakers, setting intelligence priorities related to the issues to be addressed. The Italian Intelligence System (*Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica*, SISR) speaks of "[…] the body of information that government authorities need - as a support for their national security decisions – in order to have an exhaustive knowledge framework on thematic areas, phenomena, events, geographical areas and subjects/organisations of interest.[8]" The

[7] The following account integrates the previously cited work by T. Saintclaire with the website of the Italian Intelligence System (www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/analisi-intelligence), the one of the US Intelligence Community (https://www.intelligence.gov/how-the-ic-works), and the *Glossario intelligence* (2019).
[8] www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/analisi-intelligence. Translation is my own.

relationship thus resembles a consumer-supplier one, with the former being the decision-making level and the latter intelligence providers (in the case of the state, intelligence agencies). The needs are generally expressed by a collegial body bringing together the branches of state administration where information for national security is most needed. This could be represented by a national security council or an inter-ministerial committee, who then refers to the liaison body of the agencies (such as the relatively recent ODNI[9] in the US or the DIS[10] in Italy). Generally, in the case of states, this planning assumes the form of fully-fledged research agenda, which can span over a period of years yet susceptible to variation in relation to the changing circumstances. This agenda must ideally meet efficacy in terms of costs and benefits, and must be implemented within a defined timeframe, all the more so in the case of a pressing threat to national security, where knowledge must be at the same time reliable and anticipated.

Even though the standard relationship ideally presupposes a one-way link going from the supplier to the user, this is not always the case. The relationship leading to the planning (and subsequent phases as well) of intelligence collection may make use of several inputs at different levels, even flipping the demand-supply scheme. Suggestions and contributions from the economic, academic, industrial or scientific sectors in the state play a role in the definition of the information objectives, due to the increased variety of themes intelligence has to deal with today. Economic-financial (*Ecofin*) intelligence, for instance, is nowadays an established activity in the agencies and integrates itself with the precious work of police forces against organised crime. Another important integration is the one with the diplomatic branches of the state. Embassies constitute a fundamental base abroad tasked with regularly reporting to the foreign ministry on the situation in the country, providing the contextualising background for further, more specific intelligence to be collected in that country.

Collection Phase

[9] Office of the Director of National Intelligence.
[10] *Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza*.

It is the operational step, carried out by the ad-hoc organisms – agencies – where the actual operations for information acquisition are conducted. The information – at this stage called *raw intelligence* as it is not yet processed and refined – can be acquired either "internally" by the agencies themselves, through specific methodologies and techniques (HUMINT, SIGINT, etc.), or "externally" from other sources (an example is the so-called "intelligence outsourcing", whereby a country commissions part of the collection to a foreign counterpart or even to a private company); and it can be collected in an open or covert way, with the latter having a major significance when speaking of these organisms. The debate on lawfulness is one of the most controversial aspects, with a wide literature and case law on it. The US Intelligence Community officially specifies that "[a]ll collection methods must be lawful"; however, national legislations mostly regard this very same activity as illegal when carried out against them and on their territory (this is demonstrated by the existence of a separate, defensive activity, namely *counterintelligence*), while international law has not yet addressed the matter in a thoroughly comprehensive way. In this phase, at the directional level, available assets are evaluated and handled so as to ensure that the intelligence priorities are optimally met. The individuation and eventual establishment of new sources can also be considered part of this phase.[11]

Synergy between diverse sectors of the state is visible also in the collection phase, although in a different manner. Without prejudice to the primary role of the agencies, the vast bulk of openly accessible information provided by diplomatic missions and its envoys are an important base for their work and fit, again, in the contextualisation dynamic mentioned above. But the most prominent manifestation of this synergy – at least from a "logistic" point of view – lies in the fact that diplomatic missions officially or unofficially host intelligence collectors, providing a backing for it. Military attachés are the oldest and most known figure of this type and are overt collectors, while diplomatic cover is used for stationing intelligence operatives in embassies. Even though the latter case is incompatible with the status of diplomat according to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations[12] (1961), it is an "open secret" that every state does

[11] www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/analisi-intelligence.
[12] VCDR, art. 3.1(d).

so (Hughes and Oleson, 2016). The extent and purposes of this action varies depending on whether the host country is an allied or friendly one, perhaps object of a liaison and in which case the action may also be disclosed to some authorities; or an unfriendly one, where an eventual detection may lead to the revocation of credentials and the expulsion of the officials deemed to be spies, potentially worsening bilateral relationships. A peculiar instance is the use of nationals abroad, an example being the frequent usage by China of abroad students for espionage efforts (Eftimiades, 2020; Teti, 2024).

Processing and Analytical Phase

It is regarded by many as the most important step of the cycle. Once that relevant raw information is acquired, it must be transformed into *knowledge* for it to be "consumed", and it is for this reason that much of the good or bad reputation that intelligence organisms earn can be said to depend on the success of this phase. The SISR defines it as the phase where "[…] through analysis, the raw intelligence element is transformed into an articulate cognitive contribution. This phase represents the distinctive passage of Intelligence.[13]" Sometimes processing is considered as a separate phase: it can entail "organisation and refinement[14]" of large amount of data through techniques such as decoding, translation, or re-ordering. Generally, raw intelligence – which in this phase undergoes processes of categorisation, evaluation/assessment, and correlation among data – is confronted against two parameters, namely the trustworthiness of the source and the substantiation of the piece of information. The first criterion has a scale ranging from A to F, with A representing the highest level of reliability, E the absence of reliability, and F the impossibility of assigning a level; the second one has a scale ranging from 1 to 6, with 1 representing a true and confirmed report, 5 the high improbability of the report, and 6 the impossibility of assigning a level[15]. The expression "A1" will thus characterise the most reliable piece of information and "F6" the least one. The intelligence analyst "makes use of several methodologies (SWOT[16] analysis, ACH[17] analysis etc.), proceeding to integrate information with the knowledge framework deriving from the wealth of

[13] Ibid. Translation is my own.
[14] https://www.intelligence.gov/how-the-ic-works. Here, it is considered as a separate phase.
[15] For the details of both criteria see Saintclaire, T. pp. 26-27 and *Glossario Intelligence* (2019).
[16] Strenghts, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.
[17] Analysis of Competing Hypotheses.

information on the fact or phenomenon under investigation, to identify new elements and significant aspects and to elaborate intelligence products endowed with a situational and forecasting approach, relying as much on specialised preparation and a marked aptitude for deductive and inductive reasoning.[18]" Analysis can assume a tactical, operational, or strategic nature depending on circumstances, with the time span covered playing a substantial role – indeed, strategic (long-term) analysis is often confronted with short-term and first-impact analysis. This phase may benefit from the contribution by other actors, too; however, when it comes to the core of analysis as the distinctive task of intelligence, which means formulating hypotheses basing on processed information, the absolute protagonists are the agencies themselves, more specifically their analysis directorates.

Utilisation Phase

It is generally considered as the ending phase of the cycle. After the creation of an intelligence product obtained by transforming raw intelligence into a knowledge-providing asset, its distribution (or dissemination) to the various administrations of the state is carried out. When institutional recipients receive the final product, they can either make use of it in relation to the decisions to made or the actions to be undertaken, or even express a request for additional information, causing the cycle to reinitiate. This phase entails (part of) production, since finalising and adjustment steps, similar to processing in the analytical phase, can be taken to improve the usability by the recipient; dissemination, which constitutes the link between the consumer and the supplier; and memorisation, to allow the product to be consulted and utilised in the future as well. Dissemination can happen in a variety of ways: the President's Daily Brief (PDB) in the US is a well-known example. Memorisation also encompasses the definition of the classification levels to be assigned.

Evaluation and Feedback Phase

[18] *Glossario Intelligence* (2019). Translation is my own.

Even though this phase can be cited *a latere* as a distinct one, it can be both the final step of the cycle, whereby institutional consumers evaluate if the knowledge needs have been met or not; or a continuous process, going on throughout the whole cycle even before its conclusion and triggering the re-start of research, whenever analysts experience a cognitive gap in the middle of the process.

Figure 1: The intelligence cycle as depicted by the SISR (source: www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/analisi-intelligence).

1.3.2. The Acquisition Techniques

Basing on the sources whereby raw intelligence derives, and/or the targets at stake, various techniques (or methodologies or disciplines) of acquisition can be outlined. Some minor variations in the literature regarding the categorisation are present also here; however, the general framing develops as follows:

HUMINT (*Human Intelligence*)

It is the oldest, and according to many, the most important and indispensable modality of information collection, and as the name says, it is based on human sources

and contacts. Sources can be neutral, friendly, or hostile; aware or unaware of the role that they are playing. Three sub-typologies further define HUMINT in relation to the modalities of *activity*: i) OVERT, where the only secreted factor is the purpose of the informative research, and every activity is conducted with open sources. It can entail, for instance, interrogatories to immigrants, refugees, or prisoners, but also debriefings by travellers or naval/air crews; ii) SENSITIVE, where, notwithstanding a context of legality, both the purposes and the committer of the research; iii) CLANDESTINE, ultimately constituting a form of *covert action* where even the field operators disguise their identity, thus potentially infringing the national legislation of the country where they are operating. For these reasons, Human Intelligence highly relies on the professional and personal skills of the agent.

OSINT (*Open-Source Intelligence*)

It is the most accessible yet potentially misleading method of information acquisition as it makes use of open, public, and freely accessible sources, in contrast to covert or secret ones. It is increasingly linked to cyber intelligence (SOCMINT, *Social Media Intelligence*, represents indeed a sub-category); and uses, for instance, governmental reports, interviews, websites, press releases, scholarly publications, and the like. Much of the bulk of information processed by embassies for diplomatic reports comes from open sources, and, in general, OSINT is nowadays acquiring an ever increasingly prominent role because of the pervading presence of the Internet.

SIGINT (*Signals Intelligence*)

It represents one of the most technical and progress-linked methodology, since it relies on the interception of electromagnetic signalling through dedicated installations and capabilities, either stationary or movable. Along with HUMINT, it constitutes another fundamental pole of intelligence and also has a considerable history, given that attempts to decipher and tap signals arose almost in concomitance with the birth of telecommunications. A further twofold distinction between COMINT (*Communications Intelligence*) and ELINT (*Electronic signals Intelligence*) emerges here. The former can

be regarded as a "human-SIGINT", being concerned with intercepting signals emitted between human communications and thus sharing a commonality with HUMINT; the latter targets non-human signals and represents proper machine-signals espionage. Given that confidential conversations are often encrypted as well, Signals Intelligence makes wide use of crypto-analysis instruments. Because of its significance, some countries have dedicated agencies for this type of intelligence gathering, such as the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US, or the GCHQ in the UK.

IMINT (*Imagery Intelligence*)

It is among the most used techniques today and focuses on the acquisition of images of people, objects, and geographical areas, in this latter case sharing its focus with GEOINT (*Geospatial Intelligence*). These images are mostly obtained through aerial reconnaissance or satellites, especially thanks to the recent remarkable progresses made in geo-satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), increasingly used all the more so in contexts of hybrid warfare.

TECHINT (*Technical Intelligence*)

It is the branch that targets military capabilities and armaments, and generally foreign materials and equipment. It allows to have a competitive advantage in military and strategic development by preventing a country from being caught "off guard". The very same acronym can be used to mean "Technological Intelligence" and must not be confused, as it indicates every modality that makes use of technical instruments and is not exclusively human. In this case, it encompasses SIGINT, GEOINT, most of IMINT and MASINT, constituting the opposite pole to Human Intelligence.

MASINT (*Measurement and Signature Intelligence*)

It is a category which obtained recognition only recently and can be regarded as a residual one as it covers all intelligence that cannot be encompassed in the latter categories. It is concerned with the "quantitative and qualitative analysis of data […]

derived from specific technical sensors for the purpose of identifying any distinctive features associated with the emitter or sender, and to facilitate subsequent identification and/or measurement of the same. (US Army, 2010)" "Measurement" thus refers to "data collected for the purpose of obtaining finite metric parameters", while "signature" indicates the "distinctive features of phenomena, equipment, or objects as they are sensed by the collection instrument (Intelligence Threat Handbook, 1996)". MASINT primary instruments are indeed sensors of various types (radar, laser, nuclear, spectroradiometric etc.) capable of capturing data remotely.

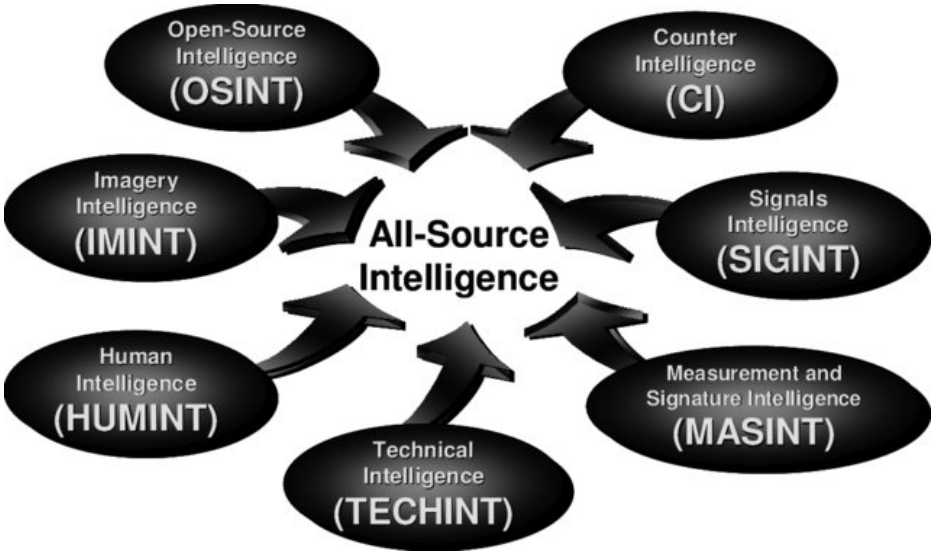

Figure 2: The various intelligence disciplines (source: Sharon R. Hamilton, 2007).

The cycle and the disciplines of acquisition represent the side of intelligence intended as a process and product. The matter assumes another shape if the perspective changes, namely if we approach it from the side of *institutions*, and this is where the focus of this research lies. Definitions become complicated when the number of elements concurring to them increase. This is the case with intelligence in modern times, consequently to its standing institutionalisation, resulting in agencies performing an increasing number of "peripheral functions" dynamically interplaying with the core (Stout and Warner, 2018).

This extension of the "agencies' agency", so to say, can be seen also product-wise, when looking at the acquisition and analytical phases. One of these peripheral activities is diplomacy, with which intelligence shares much in terms of objectives, analysis, and reporting, particularly the latter two. This shared stance and mutual exchange materialises in diplomats providing the wider context and background in a country's dynamics (Lomas, 2021; Lohse, 2025), and in intelligence officials providing information on *actual* attitudes and actions of the other parties, for instance in verifying effective compliance to arms control treaties (Hughes and Oleson, 2016; Salvatori, 2024). Moreover, diplomatic missions provide a cover for intelligence officers, with varying degrees of legality and intentions. The intertwinement between these two articulations of the state is thus a matter of fact and an insightful one, which sheds light on the functioning of both also by showing the potential problems of this bond.

1.4. Intelligence and Diplomacy Intertwined

Trying to define intelligence by mainly referring to *who* is doing it contributes significantly to the already high complexity of the debate for the simple but remarkable reason, noted by Len Scott (2004), that "[m]any intelligence services perform tasks other than gathering secret intelligence. Conversely, intelligence activities are conducted by organisations other than secret intelligence services." Information is indeed an enabling factor sought by almost every administration within state machinery, and collecting, analysing, and memorising it is not an exclusive prerogative of (secret) intelligence services. On the same line, secrecy is present in several forms in almost every branch of public administration – military, judicial, "of investigation" (in Italian, *istruttorio*), "of office" (in Italian, *d'ufficio*). Ministries can conduct their own intelligence assessments, with some having analysis departments embedded in their structure, such as the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) within the Department of State, and in some states the foreign secret service reports directly to the ministry of foreign affairs (or the analogue department), such as in the UK or Australia.

Even though intelligence and diplomacy have been treated separately and considered generally different for several decades in the intelligence literature, commonalities are abundant and the relationship between the two is as problematic as it is necessary (Hughes

and Oleson, 2016; Lomas, 2021). In *Diplomacy and Intelligence*, Don Munton (2018), after having considered various ways of distinguishing the two activities, namely i. intelligence is defined by secrecy, while diplomacy is *mostly* carried out overtly; ii. the relationship between the two is strictly of the type "spies produce and diplomats consume"; iii. "intelligence agencies *mostly* do intelligence work while diplomats and foreign ministries *mostly* do diplomacy[19]", points out how these apparently stark lines are actually blurred, going so far as to say that "there is often no line at all", which is demonstrated by those distinctions being "at best qualified [ones]. Some evident instances of this strong intertwinement exposed are i. the intelligence role of embassies, traditionally hosting "legitimised spies" such as the military attachés and being themselves the target of local espionage; ii. the sending of intelligence officers disguised as diplomats under "official cover"; iii. the diplomatic reports that embassies are required to send to foreign ministries, highly resemblant to intelligence reports. One could counter that secrecy is the discriminant, and indeed "secrets are an endemic and pervasive aspect of intelligence"; however, Munton highlights how most of the material processed by agencies is open and public (also Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002: 38). Moreover, the "qualified distinctions" mentioned above only seem to apply when intelligence is understood as an institution, which is what Michael Herman mostly does in his work.

The intertwinement is acknowledged and defended also by Daniel Lomas (2021), however highlighting the problems that a relationship between these different (at least officially) bodies can present, first of all the one of mutual trust. If diplomacy, understood as the "peaceful conduct of relations between states" (Dover and Scott, 2015: 633), is based on mutual trust, espionage can well undermine it. Reasons for that may be diplomats being left uninformed about intelligence activities or personnel within their embassies; or resentment about hosting performers of an activity – clandestine HUMINT – deemed as immoral by them and potentially compromising their missions and creating diplomatic problems with the host country (Hughes and Oleson, 2016). These frictions may escalate up to lead one to consider intelligence as "anti-diplomacy", as James Der Derian has done (1999). Yet, without prejudice to the differences existing, the complex relationship and complementarity between the two realms cannot be reduced to a strictly

[19] Emphasis added.

antithetical one, and, if ever so, this would be true only at the organisational-structural level (as it is true for most statal administrations interplay) and not ascribable to a deep-running rivalry. Rather, these tensions may be understood as supporting the very thesis of a strong contact and collaboration between the two branches that together promote "a modicum of order and intelligibility in international relations" (Wight, 1977; Der Derian, 1999; Raje, 2019). It can thus be argued that intelligence and diplomacy differ in terms of everyday functions and modalities – the "tactical" side – but share the same functional aims – the "strategic" side. In fact, being tasked with providing the government with the most representative possible situational framework of an issue (this is not always the final outcome, but therein lies another story), intelligence agencies' stabilising power in history has often been determining – a known instance being Cold War intelligence estimations of the two Blocs' capabilities. Lomas specifies the limited role that covert sources play in the vast bulk of information processed by the agencies, but seems to agree on the fact that secrecy is what defines intelligence (as an institution) from diplomacy, citing former CIA Director Tenet ("We steal secrets") and a former MI6 Chief ("Everything we do is secret – if it's not secret we shouldn't be doing it"). In the end, a similar conclusion to that by Munton is drawn, namely that intelligence and diplomacy enable each other and will face an increasing need for collaboration in the light of new challenges. Lomas thus criticises Herman's view of intelligence as just "information and information gathering" (Herman, 2004), nonetheless seeming to contradict himself when he previously cites the same Herman regarding intelligence liaison, acknowledging the possibility of cooperation.

If collaboration is endemic to diplomacy, this is intuitively not the case for secret services, both because of secrecy being an essential feature of them, and of the vital interests of the state with which they are concerned, and which are almost never tradable. However, established liaisons do exist (the Five Eyes represents the classic, institutionalised instance), and Herman claims that, besides just informing, intelligence sharing can strengthen existing diplomatic ties, even by creating a form of "professional community" sharing practices, methods and understandings (Herman, 2004). This could pave the way for a reframing of the role of intelligence in international relations, often narrowly understood only in a realist perspective – also because of the pressing issue of counter-terrorism and strictly security-related issues, which has led many agencies to

assume an almost-paramilitary role that does not suit them (Salvatori, 2024) – and not duly understood in general, constituting what has been defined as the "missing dimension of diplomatic history and international relations" (Evans and Newnham, 1998).

Talking about the diplomatic use of intelligence also raises the question of whether it constitutes an *instrument* or just an *enabler* of national power, a question discussed by Wolfberg and Young (2016). They advocate for its strict understanding as an enabler of the various typologies of state power, strongly rejecting an instrumental view of it. However, much of their discussion seems to be based on avoiding (or rather missing) the distinction previously outlined – the one between intelligence *qua* product and *qua* institution. Several statements in their work – as they actually acknowledge – hold true only "product-wise", so to say, such as "[i]ntelligence *products* themselves are not used directly[20]"; or "[c]overt action is an important instrument but it is not knowledge creation, *i.e.*, intelligence[21]" (implying that intelligence can only be a product). Their account is strictly based on a one-way consumer-supplier approach when it comes to the relationship between information and decision-makers, failing to catch the peripheral but growing roles played by agencies. Ultimately, according to Wolfberg and Young, "the risk in considering intelligence as an instrument is its absorption into the policymaking arena". This thesis upholds that this absorption is already happening, and that *intelligence diplomacy* is an instance of this phenomenon. A definition is given in the 2023 SUPO[22] Yearbook: "Intelligence diplomacy refers to the use of intelligence in achieving foreign policy objectives, to its goal-oriented disclosure, or to sharing intelligence for the benefit of partner countries." Former Assistant Secretary of State for INR Brett Holmgren has also given one (2023): "When we talk about intelligence diplomacy at the State Department, we mean that intelligence can serve as a key tool to inform, drive convergence in approaches and outlooks, enable common actions, and deprive adversaries of advantage." It can be seen how both approaches are influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in referring more or less explicitly to strategic declassification, and almost exclusively to that. There is no reference to its usage as a negotiating actor, for instance, and only the vague expression "achieving foreign policy

[20] Emphasis added.
[21] Emphasis added.
[22] *Suojelupoliisi*, Finland's Security and Intelligence Service.

objectives" could be interpreted in this sense; however, both formulations fail to catch the increasing active role played by intelligence agencies in negotiations. A better formulation is provided by Chris Taylor (2023), reading "[t]his is intelligence diplomacy in action - using intelligence actors and relationships to conduct, or substantially facilitate, diplomatic relations". On the same line, the Australian Office of National Intelligence website explicitly cites intelligence diplomacy, saying that the national intelligence community liaises "with international partners to build relationships and convey messages that advance wider Australian Government international and diplomatic priorities." The latter two formulations catch the recent tendency of agencies to "go diplomatic".

Stressing on the under-theorisation of intelligence in international relations and on the consequent need for a better framing of this dimension of international politics, it is at this point insightful to investigate on what pushes states to adopt intelligence as a negotiating actor, making it a driving force in international relations and in the resolution of crises.

Chapter 2: How and Why Intelligence and Diplomacy Intertwine?

2.1 Introduction

This chapter proceeds on the basis of the claim, expounded in the last section of the previous chapter, that modern intelligence shows a high degree of intertwinement with other realms and in particular with diplomacy. This latter instance is the focus of this thesis. More precisely, the association can be understood through the lens of several categories, which show modalities, degrees, and outcomes of such intertwinement. This categorisation constitutes a step forward compared to the previous elaboration, which was concerned with the general connection and mutual contribution that intelligence and diplomacy give to one another, as well as with historical and procedural developments that have led to some operational overlaps. However, current literature fails to systematise and capture the trend that sees intelligence actively involved in international bargaining. With this categorisation, a deeper understanding is provided, in that reference is made to concrete instances and cases where intelligence and diplomacy come together and join

one another in an effort toward a common objective, yet with different means, modalities, and degrees of cooperation. Moreover, this will serve as an ordering tool and as the theoretical basis of research for what will follow in the last chapter.

The link between these two branches of statecraft, as it is outlined in the previous chapter, has been addressed from several perspectives. A satisfactory amount of literature about the already cited complementarity between the two branches is present, given the coincidence of targets they share as information-seeking institutions. Insights about its position inside the state machinery, possible rivalries, differences in approaches, even the possibility of being understood as a form of "anti-diplomacy", but also inter-intelligence cooperation, are aspects of this link that have been discussed, too. Especially in US academia, it can be seen how the issue of covert action – starting from its definition all the way to the various historical cases that still raise much debate as to whether they should be regarded as covert action instances or not – occupies considerable scholarly attention. But when it comes to the question that guides this thesis, namely what factors encourage states to employ intelligence for negotiation purposes, the existing literature shrinks. Much of the studies that address this aspect either do that superficially, ascribing it to the general category of covert action or to organisational overlaps within state branches; or, while acknowledging the presence of such a practice, fail to grasp its peculiarity and novelty.

2.2. The Need for a Better Framing and The Work of Gentry

A remarkable exception is represented by the work of John A. Gentry (2020). In his article "Diplomatic Spying: How Useful Is It?", Gentry explores the "motives" that "recurrently lead statesmen to use spies as diplomats", an attempt highly resemblant with that of this thesis' research question, along with other findings of the paper. Starting from the fact that nowadays "professional diplomats are readily available" with foreign ministries and embassies established almost everywhere, the peculiarity of choosing "to use intelligence officers for diplomatic purposes" is noted. In other words, "statemen do not have to use spies as diplomats", as it is said afterwards, making the "why" interesting in the first place. Another assumption shared by this thesis and Gentry's work is indeed

that this phenomenon is not only noteworthy, but also qualifies for theorisation and comparative analysis. On this basis, the author identifies "general patterns" arising among the motives for statesmen to use spies as diplomats, speaking respectively of access, secrecy, credibility, issue importance, trust, image, strategic signalling, and organisational interests. The first four motives are understood as driven by "perceived *diplomatic needs* given the international political and security situations they face" and by "perceived *capabilities of their intelligence services*"; and the following three by "motives that centre on leaders' *personal goals or relationships* with spies or diplomats, or both, especially involving issues of trust". The last factor – organisational interests – is a residual one. The eight patterns identified are subsequently showed through representative cases in history, which though are only meant to be a discussion and not a thorough case study. Moreover, these patterns are not "pure types", and their advantages and effects often arise in a blended manner. It is thus useful to review these patterns and their historical manifestations as they constitute part of the basis of this research.

2.2.1. *Access*

By access, Gentry refers to the fact that intelligence agencies can open special doors for foreign policymaking purposes. More precisely, "they provide access to actors of interest when there are no ready means, or channels, by which their conventional diplomats can communicate reliably with the actors." This lack of access can be due to several reasons. Non-state actors are a substantial part of the issue, where the problem of recognition must be faced by the engaging state. Almost every time there is an armed confrontation with a militant terrorist group, the government's public position is that dealing with terrorists is inadmissible – first, because it would implicitly confer political recognition to the group, and second, because of the moral implications that talking to terrorists would entail. Intelligence agencies, especially HUMINT collection ones, represent the right actor in these cases, in that they can grant plausible deniability and confidentiality through undisclosed talks, shielding the diplomatic action from possible public critiques; and they have usually got, given their focus on human-intelligence, long-standing, developed relationships with representatives of that group or with third-party people who can lead to that group. It is the case of the British MI5 (responsible for internal security) and MI6 (tasked with foreign collection) establishing a channel between the

government of Margaret Thatcher and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) starting in 1971. The Prime Minister clearly stated the absolute inadmissibility of talking with terrorists, while at the same time intelligence officers were holding contacts with the paramilitary group, interestingly with a margin of autonomous action, according to Len Scott (2004). Both services were involved since there was a conflict internal to the United Kingdom and the PIRA was active also abroad (primarily in the Republic of Ireland). The author points out that a settlement was reached in 1998 – only 27 years after the first contact – suggesting that the agencies' intervention may have been "modestly or belatedly effective". However, the very engagement of the Services is the fact of interest here.

Strained (or even absent) diplomatic relations can cause a lack of access, too, paving the way for intelligence-channelled communications. Gentry discusses the case of Cuba-US relations, formally severed in 1961 by the US and thus with no Cuban embassy active in Washington until 2015. At the height of the Cold War, President Carter's administration was frustrated by the convergence of Cuban and Soviet initiatives for gaining influence in the Third World and tried to approach a Cuban intelligence officer based in New York. The message, entailing a possible compromise about lifting sanction in case Cuba stopped collaborating with the USSR, was delivered by Deputy National Security Advisor David Aaron and CIA officer Robert Gates, and the channel was established by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The author notes that Cuba did have a mission to the United Nations in NY, explaining the involvement of the domestic security service, and that the FBI was entitled to "discuss law enforcement issues with foreign governments". In this case, intelligence diplomacy, although still in a covert manner, seems to have developed also by having selectively followed some conventional practices, namely engaging with a diplomatic mission (although not the "main" one) and using the "right" service territory-wise.

Another case of interest, although not discussed by Gentry and on which still lies much historiographical uncertainty, is the one of the Italian army colonel Stefano Giovannone. An agent of the SID (*Servizio Informazioni Difesa*, the single intelligence agency of Italy from 1966 to 1977) and then of the SISMI (*Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare*, military and foreign intelligence agency from 1977 to 2007),

Giovannone served in the military intelligence from 1965 to 1981, becoming head of the services' centre in Beirut and witnessing the Lebanese Civil War. Through his several years of service, he developed deep contacts with prominent Palestinian paramilitary groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and was generally responsible, on behalf of Italy, for relationships with Middle East nations and groups. He is also said to "have enjoyed a great deal of independence", in the words of a former colleague (Satta, 2016), testifying how there was room for intelligence performing diplomacy. Notwithstanding the blank points and contradictions affecting the history of that period, it is acknowledged by several judicial and parliamentary reports that the SISMI, in the person of Giovannone, pursued a significant diplomatic action with those non-state actors in that area. In particular, the final report of the Parliamentary Committee on the Kidnapping and Death of Aldo Moro (2017) speaks of a "constant interlocution between the Italian Services and the PLO Services and, in part, the PFLP[23]" as well as of "relationships with Palestinians framed into an intelligence action which involved several linked services, including Palestinian and Israeli ones[24]".

2.2.2. *Secrecy*

Even what seems to be the most straightforward feature of intelligence is subject to debate as to its relevance. Be it its defining feature or a simple characteristic, secrecy pervades the work of intelligence agencies and constitutes another good reason for statesmen to exploit it. The usefulness of secrecy unfolds in four ways, namely securing communications from political and international enemies; enabling communications with several actors and at various levels simultaneously; facilitating deceptive communications; and allowing for plausible deniability in case of leaks. A key example cited is the one of the Soviet KGB. Besides being involved in covert action to gain influence in the Third World through "active measures" (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*), the KGB established various types of contacts – agents, agents of influence, confidential contacts – where the latter type was a proper instance of parallel diplomacy. This allowed

[23] Translation is my own.
[24] Translation is my own.

the Soviet Union to maintain official positions towards certain actors (or present herself as detached from them) while actively engaging with targets of interest. Records of "confidential contacts" included, among others, Costa Rican President Ferrer and eventual West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, and the responsible division of the KGB was in high competition with the diplomatic service at that time. This competition emerged also in Chile, where President Allende's main correspondent from the USSR was the KGB resident Kuznetsov and not the regular ambassador – a subordination that the following Soviet ambassador, Basov, was unwilling to accept, which led him to be sidelined.

Spy diplomacy also allows for suggestion and proposals in order to "test the waters". While conventional diplomacy, i.e., scheduling a bilateral meeting, issuing a joint statement, or signing a treaty imply a manifest and definitive (or at least medium-long term) commitment under the public opinion gaze, messages conveyed through intelligence channels can be discarded if the other party is unwilling to undertake the commitment and are not binding in any way for the parties. This permits frankness in the flow of communication and has been compared, by some commentators, to a sort of "dark oxygen", a lubricant oiling the hidden mechanisms of international relations. Talks held between former CIA director Burns and the Putin administration on nuclear and other security issues fall in this case. On the other hand, this can assume a deceptive nature as well, as the case of Secretary of State Dean Rusk shows. With the aim of pressuring Moscow on security issues, Rusk delivered West Germany data on false U.S. war plans, being certain about KGB's infiltration in the German cabinet. Accordingly, he thought that the threat would be perceived as more plausible had the USSR acquired the information by themselves rather than received it through conventional diplomatic channels.

2.2.3. *Credibility*

The tasks assigned to each branch of state administration shape the perception of their stance. Especially in non-democratic states, security issues and the relative channels are taken in major consideration by statesmen, and spies may be seen as "tough guys", in Gentry's words. The variable of (perceived) credibility thus plays a role and can lead

statesmen to use their spies as diplomats both because they trust their services' abilities and reputation and because that channel is preferred by their counterpart. Moreover, Gentry notes that the activation of an intelligence contact can help deliver the seriousness of the matter in a way that routine diplomatic contacts may not be able to do.

The recent developments in US – North Korea relations are eloquent in this sense. The first contact had been established in 2009 and contributed to the progressive exchange of information and stabilisation of the situation up to the summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un in 2018 – the first ever in history between the head of the two states. Preparation meetings were held between CIA deputy directors Michael Morell and Avril Haynes, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and General Kim Yong Chol, then head of DPRK's Reconnaissance General Bureau, and the North Korean mission to the UN in New York – its only diplomatic representation in the US – was largely bypassed. Mike Pompeo, CIA director and then Secretary of State, also played a key role in arranging the summit. Dealing with the "hardline elements of the North Korean regime" was seen by the US as the most effective strategy in that the security establishment was also the branch more involved in foreign policymaking, in spite of the ministry of foreign affairs.

The variable of credibility is also synonym with seriousness. Choosing the unconventional channel of intelligence for diplomatic matters, especially in a covert manner, can make the issue appear very different to the counterpart and way more serious. In the North Korean case, the absence of proper developed relationships played a role, in that the only longstanding contacts were the ones established by the CIA, but the commitment to secretly engage with a pariah state and to try to break a "diplomatic taboo" in their relations significantly contributed to the final outcome, i.e., the summit. President Trump, during a press conference, indeed declared that "very high levels" of discussion were ongoing in that days.

2.2.4. *Functional Importance of Issues*

Directly related to credibility and seriousness is the importance attached to the matter at stake. The more important a mission is deemed to be, the more *credible* the

institution performing it must be (or perceived to be), both to the home state and to the target state. As noted by Gentry, the intelligence turn to diplomacy can happen "when conventional diplomats are unenthusiastic about the issue in question, are not available, or are not as capable as spies in some respects". This combination ultimately explains the Soviet engagement for the influence dominion in the Third World, started by Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s. The KGB, with its First Chief Directorate at the forefront, enjoyed a "bureaucratic dominance" over the foreign ministry such that several national leaders preferred to relate with its residents rather than with the ambassadors. This strategy was successful in the short-medium term, with the establishment of several "confidential contacts": "The World Was Going Our Way", as the book by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin titles.

The same can happen for more short-term, circumscribed missions and issues. The several talks convened by Bill Clinton at the end of his presidency between Israel and Palestine had as "honest broker", in Clinton's words, CIA Director Tenet. Relationships with the security establishments of both parties and the request by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that the deal be "monitored successfully" led the Agency to play a prominent role. Even though Tenet declared that the CIA only had to implement the President's policy goals, his public role as a diplomat stood out and conferred on that institution a success that its directors often avoid to openly recognise.

2.2.5. *Trust*

Along with contextual or environmental factors, there are some *personal* or *psychological* motives leading national leaders to use spies as diplomats, concerning the individual relations between them in the chain of command. Trust is one of them, and Gentry interestingly notes that it is often misplaced (or misunderstood) when speaking of politics and espionage. Deep trust may emerge between a national leader and a foreign official which then turns out to be an intelligence officer, or mistrust may develop between national politicians and the national agencies, with varying degrees – and the two may unfold in unexpected ways.

A striking instance of misplacing or misunderstanding is showed by Gentry through the relationships developed by President Kennedy and his brother Robert, at that time Attorney General, with the TASS correspondent in Washington Georgi Bolshakov, actually an undercover GRU Colonel. In 1961, Bolshakov started to have increasingly frequent meetings with Robert Kennedy, persuading them that his contacts with Moscow would improve the information and diplomatic exchange between the two countries. This was indeed the case, in that the established backchannel between the GRU – in the person of Bolshakov – and the Kennedy administration significantly contributed to the development of some salient events in the following years. The June 1961 Kennedy-Khrushchev summit in Vienna and the October Berlin Crisis had a positive outcome, but the Cuban Missile Crisis represented a turning point. Over time, Bobby Kennedy thought to have developed a real, personal friendship with the Colonel and repeatedly invited him at his home, but in 1962 he misled the President as to the actual Soviet intentions in Cuba. Probably Moscow did not inform Bolshakov about the true plans for the island, however it is in any case evident how an asymmetry emerged between the two sides' ways of seeing the relationship. Kennedy thought that real friendship and mutual trust beyond political interests emerged, while the GRU's goal was ultimately to cultivate and influence them – even though not necessarily as fully-fledged "confidential contacts" – thus using the gained trust in a different way.

2.2.6. *Image*

The variable of image may be understood as a function of credibility. In this sense intelligence services perform a diplomatic function in conveying a certain image to other states, and they are often the best institution to carry out that task. US – North Korean relations discussed above are again useful in explaining this variable. The higher willingness of the Pyongyang regime to entertain relations with Washington's security establishment was due also to them being seen as "tough", besides the usual preference for security channels by authoritarian regimes. Another episode, slightly unconventional yet representative, depicts the importance of identity.

Gentry recalls when in 2014 the Obama administration was dealing with the detention of two US citizens in North Korea, and the official chosen for the mission by

the President was the then DNI James Clapper. Pyongyang requested that the official dealing with them be a cabinet-level one and member of the National Security Council (NSC), carrying a letter from the President addressed to Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un. The task was at the end accomplished, and the explanation for the President's choice given by a New York Times columnist was very acute. Clapper – a retired Air Force general turned intelligence officer with no diplomatic background – was "gruff", "blunt-speaking" and so "an unlikely diplomat", and for these very reasons "perfect for the North Koreans". When Clapper told Obama about the article, the President laughed and agreed. Such an episode may contribute to show the importance of the ability by states to "match the cultures or demeanours of interlocutors", which can also entail the usage of unconventional diplomatic actors like intelligence.

2.2.7. *Strategic Signalling*

In a way similar to that of military power or military intentions signalling, intelligence may engage in such strategic signalling of intentions, too. Gentry links the aim of conveying certain messages to the patterns already described of credibility, issue importance, and image, which all contribute to delivering a certain seriousness on the matter. At the same time, he underlines how this should not be interpreted as "to label all diplomats as effete". The point of the analysis is to stress that unconventional negotiation situations may require unconventional negotiating actors.

Yet, strategic signalling may entail not "properly diplomatic" actions, as David Gioe and others have suggested while discussing President Putin's actions against political enemies. The practice by Putin – a former KGB agent – of assassinating political enemies and particularly dissident intelligence officers in recognisable, "implausibly deniable" ways has been understood as a continuation of the same Soviet practice. This would show Russia's resolve and brutal intolerance towards double agents, which in other jurisdictions are simply arrested and put into custody. Cases such as the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, Sergei Skripal or Alexei Navalny constitute some evidence. By recognisable and implausibly deniable, it is meant that there is a common thread in those episodes – the use of certain poisons such as Novichok but also Polonium-210, which cause a slow and painful death in turn largely covered by the media and gaining

worldwide resonance. Such modalities of operation have also been labelled with an interesting oxymoron – *ostensibly covert action*.

Other and less hard-line cases show the use of intelligence to strategically signal something. For instance, in 1973 a "backchannel" was established by the CIA, upon approval of National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, with Yasser Arafat. However, the channelling individual was a senior Fatah operative, Ali Hassan Salameh, involved in several terrorist attacks against Israel. Even though the channel was useful for the USA, Israel saw the decision as an outrageous and unacceptable position towards Arafat and Palestine, all the more so because it came from an ally. Another backchannel communication thus came from Tel Aviv with ordering the Mossad to kill Salameh. In the end, Washington seemed to have ignored the message, but it was very probably understood and constituted an interestingly covert way of sending a political message to an ally.

2.2.8. *Organisational Interests*

As every state branch, intelligence agencies try to advance their bureaucratic and portfolio interests, engaging in the organisational rivalry that characterises with varying degrees every public administration. The development of such rivalries can sometimes also benefit from different views of certain foreign policy agendas, as some episodes, again from the Soviet Union, show. Latin America had been a remarkably important theatre for the USSR, but the KGB had, according to Andrew and Mitrokhin, way more ambitious policy initiatives than the Foreign Ministry and the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The latter two indeed thought that Latin America was experiencing major US influence and that trying to engage in that area was not profitable. The KGB took thus advantage of this difference of views to advance its own policy convictions and initiatives. Among other things, Soviet embassies in South America were numerically insufficient, and this helped the KGB establish strong contacts with Castro's regime through its resident; when a Soviet ambassador was posted in Havana, the main channel with Moscow remained the resident Alekseyev. Moreover, the KGB shared the idea of spreading the revolution, which the Foreign Ministry saw as less important. Once

appointed as regular ambassador, Alekseyev was disappointed and annoyed by the new office, which entailed lesser contacts with Castro and unrewarding bureaucratic tasks.

2.2.9. *Conclusions*

The cases expounded by Gentry are the confirmation of a trend that is noticeable throughout history, and that could help deliver the elements to fix some deficiencies in historically salient episodes. This converges with the claim by Evans and Newnham about intelligence being the "missing dimension of diplomatic history and international relations" – a dimension that will be hopefully clarified with the progressive declassification and transfer to national archives of documental heritage. What can be done at the current stage of this trend, especially with contemporary episodes, is to detect it and see its presence across similar cases. In his conclusions, Gentry highlights the general effectiveness of spies as diplomats and the likely continuation of this practice. Such practice can either occur between friendly states, where spies act as aides to regular diplomatic channels; or between adversary states experiencing strained overt relationship, and as states' agents towards nonstate actors. Their involvement in the "broad framework of diplomacy" entails various functions with varying degrees: they can "test the waters" by generating initial contacts that may or may not further develop; transmit messages as agents having unique channels of communication, and may or may not be aware of the broader framework in which they are operating; or be active negotiators on behalf of political leaders or ministers, with a generally considerable amount of autonomous leeway.

Implications touching foreign policy, decision making, and intelligence studies are thus present. Despite the deep intertwinement between intelligence, diplomacy and foreign policy, the literature about the three realms does not give it proper attention, and the spies-as-diplomats topic is even more under-theorised. The anecdotal evidence presented by Gentry, as well as other evidence, suggests a wider tendency framework to be analysed with deeper case studies and theorisation. The larger bulk of consequences regards the branch of intelligence studies. Acknowledging the poor attention given to the phenomenon, *intelligence diplomacy* should be openly recognised, described and assessed as a distinguished function of intelligence, even though it is not a key function

such as collection, analysis, or counterintelligence. It is interestingly pointed out that in this sense, it resembles covert action in being "intermittently performed, but widely recognised". Something to be deepened is also the reason why HUMINT agencies (and collectors) are the ones more involved in this trend. It has already been suggested that analysts, technical collectors and the like are less likely to develop meaningful individual relationships useful for the resolution of crises and for negotiation, however the picture may be broader. Moreover, "diplomatic spies" – having to engage in something that is not their conventional, primary task – do not usually receive any training on doing diplomacy, and how and why they become good diplomats (or not) remains thus unclear. Organisational culture or tradecraft of operations may be some of the traits influencing their successes, which in any case seem to be more than the failures, explaining the likely continuation of this usage by statesmen. A more accurate balance of successes and failures, as well as how different states and intelligence agencies therein employ spies as diplomats, would also contribute to the general understanding. At the end, the eight patterns outlined are only preliminary blocks of the theoretical framework to be developed. An attempt to better systematise the above findings and move towards a categorisation may be represented by the following framing.

2.3. Towards a Categorisation

First, a macro-distinction is made to clarify the difference between *intelligence-enabled diplomacy* and *intelligence diplomacy* – without prejudice to the possible partial overlap between the two – and to state again the purpose of this research, concerned with the latter phenomenon. Subsequently, *intelligence diplomacy* is addressed and explained according to a threefold sub-categorisation. The first one may be named "intelligence at the negotiating table"; the second one is the "backchannel approach", which, although not an exclusive prerogative of secret services, consists of the subtler lines of communications set up between two countries, especially if they experience strained relations in the overt sphere. "Clandestine diplomacy" directly relates to the previous two, featuring an even stronger presence of secrecy (indeed, clandestine) and employed in the context of high-risk, unpredictable talks. This modality acquires particular significance when intelligence officers engage with non-state actors (NSA), in that plausible deniability is ensured along with the other advantages explained above. This threefold

distinction can be thus understood as the single category of intelligence diplomacy unfolding into three increasing degrees of secrecy – intelligence negotiation, backchannel approach, clandestine diplomacy.

Intelligence liaison constitutes a peculiar instance as inter-intelligence cooperation is usually not primarily related to diplomatic purposes. However, it is often driven by them or fosters them and shall be considered as contributing to this analysis. Strategic declassification (or disclosure) represents a unique case, where the role of agencies is openly and intentionally made public. It involves intelligence in the sense of the information product at the policymaker's disposal, who can decide to render that product public to a certain degree for various purposes, be it deterrence, justification of military actions, ease of diplomatic tensions, or ease of talks. Being a case of public disclosure, the documented examples are several, especially by the US, among which one can cite the gradual diffusion of intelligence by the Biden administration in the weeks preceding the invasion of Ukraine – which was a quite successful case if one looks at the intended purpose, namely make the EU and the West prepare for the event and rally for support to Ukraine. An infamous case, on the other hand, was the misuse of intelligence to assert that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which was used to justify the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and ultimately proved to be false. This category does not belong to the focus of this analysis and is ascribable to the macro-category of *intelligence-enabled diplomacy*, yet it shall be considered.

2.3.1. Intelligence-Enabled Diplomacy

In the previous chapter, coincidences of various types between the two realms – operational, purposive, methodological etc. – have been exposed. Much of these coincidences are because they both share an information-seeking (or at least information-oriented) nature. This makes the case for an enabling nature of intelligence towards diplomacy, allowing us to speak of *Intelligence-Enabled Diplomacy*. This enabling nature is immanent within intelligence, in the sense that knowledge always shapes – however positively or negatively – foreign policy decisions; but can also be occasional, in the sense that specific pieces of intelligence knowledge can be utilised to advance certain foreign policy objectives.

Intelligence in foreign policy has the features of not having a defined "battlefield" with clearly distinguished "enemy lines", hence defining victory and defeat in diplomacy is not as straightforward as it is in open military conflict. Military and diplomatic intelligence share the concern for assessment of relative power but differ as to how conflicts are seen – a zero-sum game by the former, a win-win situation by the latter – and consequently to their ways on risk calculation. Directly related to the thrust to compromise is the possibility, that diplomatic intelligence entails, of its sharing even with adversaries or non-close allies. This can have the scope of exposing certain evidence or benign attitudes to the international community through the declassification of sensitive internal information. Generally speaking, diplomatic intelligence will have a broader scope than military one, since militaries operate in a battlefield, while diplomacy operates in "a global bazaar in which everyone is selling something, and every deal is potentially connected to all others." (Sims, 2022).

2.3.2. Intelligence Diplomacy

The intertwinement between intelligence and diplomacy finds another concrete reference in the employment by governments of intelligence officials for conducting negotiations, of which there are several instances. This constitutes a noteworthy fact as the civil servants normally tasked with conducting negotiations belong to the diplomatic service, but special reasons can lead a government to opt for other representatives. Such practice can occur with varying degrees of discretion, ranging from publicly acknowledged and reported talks to the opposite pole of clandestine diplomacy, where secrecy is the precondition for a successful outcome.

Intelligence at the Negotiating Table

Secrecy is an immanent and defining feature of intelligence services, yet it is not the only one nor it is always present. Sometimes their officers – mostly senior ones or chiefs – hold meetings with their counterparts on certain issues, resemblant to fully-fledged summit normally reserved to foreign ministers. These meetings can appear in the news and foster the institution's public side. It is not a novelty that the heads of security

agencies take part in governmental summits at the national level – national security councils, interministerial committees, or ad-hoc meetings – as consultative bodies. The peculiarity here is the fact that they are the protagonists of the roundtable, acting on behalf of the government and responsible for the matters at stake in the first place. This typology is relatively recent and new in nature, with little scholarly attention devoted to it.

Backchannel Approach

Differently from circumscribed meetings and negotiations, a back-channel represents a covert continuative "hotline" between two countries. Although not an exclusive prerogative of secret services, they are often the best and most frequently used instrument to establish such channels. Subtler lines of communications between two countries are particularly useful if they experience strained relations in the overt sphere, or if the problem of recognition arises – either because of a non-state actor (especially insurgent or "terrorist" groups) involved, or if the country in question is a "pariah state" with almost no regular possibilities of engagement available. Often, these two conditions are accompanied by security matters to be discussed within a brinkmanship context. The moderate secrecy of a back-channel ensures the parties be reciprocally aware of their actual security capabilities and intentions, easing the tensions behind the scenes; at the same time, they may continue to project a certain image of themselves in the overt sphere by making it seem that neither of them is abandoning the long-term confrontation.

Clandestine Diplomacy

A significant part of the scholarly and historiographic debate is concerned with the so-called "clandestine diplomacy". Some regard it simply as a form of covert action aimed at influencing an adversary, while others see it as a distinct practice, involving deliberate secret collaboration with the adversary. These divergences stem from the overlap between diplomacy and liaison, between conducting clandestine diplomacy and gathering intelligence, and from the very definition of covert action, called interchangeably as special operation, special activities, disruptive action, or special political action irrespective of the differences that such different terms entail (Scott,

2004). Moreover, this is the instance mostly hampered by secrecy because of the highest classification levels to which this kind of actions are subject. Therefore, much importance is attached to progressive declassification and archival acquisitions of the relevant documents by state administrations. Len Scott aptly summarises the point by highlighting that particularly useful and fertile is clandestine diplomacy to those who "seek to justify the world of intelligence to the political world; that the study of the ethical dimensions of intelligence would benefit from the "interesting and neglected dimension" represented by clandestine diplomacy; and that its study generally contributes to the wider understanding of the role of intelligence in international relations.

Gentry's work has been useful in sketching a draft of the reasons statesmen choose to employ spies as diplomats, outlining eight "pure types" of courses of action supported by some recurrent patterns in history. His findings may find an attempt to a better systematisation in the previous categorisation, which, however, also may need refinement. It is to highlight that this last paragraph succinctly distils the most salient, theoretically significant elements of each sub-category. What will follow in the next and last chapter is a discussion and evaluation of some representative cases in Italian history – which is indeed abundant in this respect – in order to detect correspondences and divergences from the scheme here presented.

Chapter 3: The Case of Italy

This chapter is concerned with evaluating the extent of the phenomenon previously outlined – intelligence diplomacy and more generally its public stance – by looking at Italy. The theoretical background outlined before made wide use of international cases and in large part of US ones. This is due to a variety of reasons, among which the smaller (yet considerable) extent of Italian projection – and so of her intelligence – throughout the global arena when compared to the US and other states; and the scarcity of archival, historical, and public sources as well as the state of the debate that is often insufficient in Italy. The choice of this terrain of analysis is thus peculiar and ought to be ascribed to various motives. The recent history of the Italian Republic, starting from the end of the Second World War onwards, helps explaining part of the matter. That period has witnessed, among other things, the turbulent transition from the Fascist regime

to the restoration of democracy and the establishment of the Republic in 1946 – a transition that in some instances was however not so marked. Indeed, it saw the reintegration and reintroduction of some officials (even senior ones) from the previous regime into the bureaucracy of the newly constituted state, and therefore also into security and intelligence apparatuses. Other variables influenced Italy's particular position in the post-war period and consequently the development, history, and debate on her intelligence. The status of defeated and "special guarded[25]" country that Italy had to accept imposed initial limitations on the size of armed forces, which provided for almost the totality of the intelligence workforce. The tense international context represented by the Cold War – whose "cold" dimension made intelligence the most suitable actor to pursue that competition – on several occasions put Italy at the centre of the stage. The role played by Italy in certain national and international affairs showed frictions and conflicting interests arising within the Atlantic Alliance and outside. Lastly, the involvement of Italian security services in some notorious facts related to organised crime and political terrorism, along with the legislative uncertainties on the functioning of intelligence and the frictions with the judicial authorities, contributed to delivering an often-negative image of that branch.

It is not in the scope of this research to go in depth as to these instances; suffice here to say that these factors and the resulting image that most public opinion associates to secret services significantly hindered the development of a proper debate on intelligence and of intelligence studies in Italy. In particular, the discourse on intelligence gets the most attention from the historiographical scholarship concerned with the political history of Italy during the "Years of Lead" (*anni di piombo*). This is partly beneficial as the role of these institutions is still in great need of further understanding and, as it has been said, represents a missing dimension; yet it does not allow the field to grow autonomously and leaves the topic embedded in a perspective which in the end remains politico-historical. The most representative fact of the stagnation experienced by the debate is the phrase *servizi segreti deviati* ("deviated secret services"), which originally referred to the unclear relationships between intelligence and organised crime and

[25] The expression is borrowed from the title of the insightful work by Romano Benini and Vincenzo Scotti, *Sorvegliata speciale: le reti di condizionamento della Prima Repubblica* (2023).

terrorism (indeed judicially proved to be true in some instances) but has been later abused to simplistically label as unlawful or illegitimate any conduct by services still to be clarified.

Talking about Italy may thus appear naïve besides counterproductive, especially when addressing such a sensitive and elusive topic as intelligence. On the contrary, it must be said that a terrain of analysis presenting some asperities also entails opportunities to face them in innovative manners and potentially find new patterns in an under-theorised field. The particular condition that this topic experiences in Italy makes the case for further elaboration and interesting aspects to be explored – within close topicality, too. Several episodes in recent history suggest a renewed activism and diplomatic role played by the agencies and its officials in negotiation and international bargaining instances. This can imply coordination with and support to the foreign diplomatic service, but also its bypassing, not without interinstitutional discontent sometimes arising. In this context, it will be useful to provide an overview of the historical evolution of the Italian intelligence system and to deepen on the current legal framework[26], as this will provide the necessary elements to contextualise the following findings.

3.1. Italian Intelligence: A Historical Overview

3.1.1. The Origins: from the Italian Unification to the First World War

When tracing the official history of intelligence in Italy, the usual starting point is situated at the half of 1800s, namely with the so called "La Marmora Instruction" (*Istruzione La Marmora*, 1855). With this ministerial circular, the then Minister of War of the Kingdom of Sardinia, Alfonso La Marmora, set the ground of what would have later developed into the information services existing today. Due to the expedition in the Crimean War and within the framework of the law disciplining the use of the Sardinian Army in foreign operations, the Army General Staff was partitioned in five services, whose fifth one was the "secret service" (*servizio segreto*). This fifth department was headed by senior generals and had a direct reporting channel to Chief of General Staff.

[26] The following two sections draw on the thorough work by T. Saintclaire (2019), *Servizi di Informazione e Sicurezza.*

Interestingly, in 1854 also the Foreign Ministry equipped itself with an analogous department, the "Superior Commission for Statistics" (*Commissione Superiore di Statistica*), tasked with collecting, elaborating and analysing data acquired both from embassies and secret informants abroad. Already from these first outsets some key takeaways are present and useful to digress upon.

First, this is the first instance where the expression "secret service" is used to officially indicate such institutional body; it would never cease to be used and is present still today along with the term "intelligence", which however should be preferred as indicating the global and multi-purpose nature of the branch. Such view has been expounded also by the incumbent Undersecretary for Intelligence Alfredo Mantovano, who on several occasions has criticized the phrase as old-fashioned and not duly describing the work of this institution in the contemporary era[27]. Second, it can be seen how the governmental need for information has often its origins in the military realm. This can be overtly seen in the United Kingdom, where the two Services have indeed maintained the acronym "Military Intelligence" (MI5 and MI6), and in some organisational patterns present still today, where the foreign collection agency reports to the Ministry of Defence – France, Denmark, Austria, or Spain. What is currently a multidisciplinary institution with cross-field competences was originally born as a purely military agency. Third, the direct reporting channel is also something that, due to the strategic nature of the institution, persists today – either formally or, more interestingly, informally; the creation of coordinating bodies tries to soften this tendency, yet with varying degrees of success. Fourth, such military origins confer on the agencies involved a pronounced operational attitude, which only later and progressively developed into a fully-fledged capacity of informing the political decisionmaker. Fifth, the case of the Sardinian Foreign Ministry's involvement in intelligence is yet another confirmation of the long-standing link between the intelligence and diplomacy realms.

The circular by La Marmora would produce effects till the First World War, but further developments took place, nonetheless. The Italian Unification and the

[27] Gabriele Carrer, 2024. *Giù le barbe finte. Mantovano su lessico intelligence e disvelamento*. Formiche. Available at https://formiche.net/2024/12/mantovano-intelligence-lessico-disvelamento/.

establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 entailed substantial bureaucratic reorganisations, also involving the informational apparatus. Indeed, in 1863 the Information Office of the Royal Army General Staff (*Ufficio Informazioni dello Stato Maggiore del Regio Esercito*) was established. This office was initially short-lived and the defeats of the Custoza and Lissa battles were attributed precisely to it; later it will be discovered that the information provided was actually truthful and that the Army disregarded it. The office was thus disbanded. It goes without saying that, even in the absence of a properly institutionalised structure within the Army General Staff, the collection activity continued to be performed, mainly by the naval military attachés accredited abroad. The Information Office (*Ufficio "I"*) was restored and reorganised in the 1890s and mainly tasked with policing and counterintelligence functions, especially against the Austrian *Evidenzbureau* and the French *Deuxième Bureau*. In addition, in that period – precisely in 1889 – espionage on behalf of foreign countries was officially declared a criminal offense, and the Service was gradually recovering from the personnel scarcity experienced after its formal suppression.

In addition, the ramping internal threats for the newly constituted Kingdom, such as banditry, fostered the development of the domestic security services as well, whose first instance was the "Confidential Office" (*Ufficio Riservato*) of the Interior Ministry. This is notable as it marks the first official establishment of the so-called "double track" (*doppio binario*) system, namely two separate agencies for foreign collection and internal security, the former military and the latter civil. The Office continued to exist until 1974, with several changes in its name but unaltered in substance, being generally known and referred to as the *Ufficio Affari Riservati* (U. AA. RR.).

But instability in the European arena was even more present. The renewed system of criss-cross alliances and the tensions across almost every regional hotspot of Europe were developing as the premises of the Great War. In such a politically unstable situation, unfortunately, Italian intelligence was not able to gain ground within the ruling elite, and its consideration was quite low. This only began to change when the tensions could no longer be ignored and a gradual empowerment of the Office "I" was sought, starting in 1905 till 1910. In those years the structure maintained until the outbreak of the Great War

was being consolidated, with a decent spy network and a renewed thrust for foreign collection activities. However, the overall architecture was designed to operate in times of peace and was not ready to the incoming war period. This led General Luigi Cadorna, head of the ad hoc, newly constituted Supreme Military Italian Command, to place the Office "I" at its dependence through the Operations Department. This happened quite hurriedly in April 1915, just some weeks before Italy's official entry into war in May.

3.1.2. The Two World Wars and The Interwar Period

At the time of Italy's entry into the war, the Office "I" was partitioned in several divisions, each one competent for a specific front line in Northern Italy, along with two detached offices in Rome and Milan. However, this setup was short-lived, and due to the further war developments and increasing Austrian attacks, a new reorganisation was pursued. At the end of 1916, the Operation Department was being articulated according to a new twofold division: one branch – the Service "I" – was responsible for information collected abroad or beyond enemy lines, while the other – the War Situation and Operations Office (*Ufficio Situazione e Operazioni di Guerra*) – for field-collected information. This way, there was both a tactical and a strategic part, yet not being able to definitively solve the structural inconsistencies of the body, among which there was the concurrent Intelligence Service of the Royal *Marina*. Drawing a balance, the general results were not disappointing, and early attempts of radio-interception and cryptography were performed (what is today known as SIGINT). The Service thus operated with this structure during the Great War, joined by the Special Investigation Office (*Ufficio Speciale d'Investigazione*) within the Ministry of the Interior for internal security, and was gradually downsized again after the end of the war as strictly military intelligence was no longer needed.

A completely renovated setup was envisioned starting from the 1920s through several legislative proposals and finally adopted after the advent of the Fascist regime. According to the new law in 1925, the secret services of the Navy and the Air Force were grouped under the new Military Intelligence Service (*Servizio Informazioni Militare*, SIM) together with the old Service "I" of the Army. In practice, they all remained autonomous, and coordination was not achieved as only the Army Intelligence reported to the SIM

despite the legal framework. It should be noted that the tendency to have multiple services also stemmed from the fear of concentrating too much power into a single institution; interestingly, this view was shared by Mussolini as well. Indeed, during the twenty years of Fascism and the Second World War, Italian intelligence came to adopt a quite complex structure, encompassing the SIM; the intelligence offices of the three armed forces; the counterespionage centre; the special information service; and the notorious OVRA (*Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascismo*). This structure remained roughly unchanged till the ceasefire with the Allied powers on September 8th, 1943. This turbulent period, that saw the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy, the Italian Civil War and the *Resistenza*, triggered disruptive confusion in handling the whole defence sector, including intelligence. A simple "Information and Liaison Office" within the Supreme Command was hardly set up to coordinate with the Allies and guide the State towards the establishment of the Republic.

3.1.3. The Republic and the Post-War Period: The Trial by Fire

After the Second World War, the intelligence apparatuses had to face the tough conditions imposed to Italy, whose peace treaty encompassed constraints on the size of military personnel, setting at 250.000 the maximum size of the joint armed forces. The military services indeed operated under the surveillance of the Anglo-American forces from 1946 to 1949, when the SIFA (*Servizio Informazioni delle Forze Armate*), shortly later SIFAR, was established with a classified circular[28] by the Minister of Defence Randolfo Pacciardi and reporting to the Defence Chief of Staff. At the same time, the information offices at each armed force became the SIOS (*Servizio Informazioni Operative e Situazione*). Due to the Cold War and the confrontation between the two blocs, the SIFAR (and its later configurations) experienced high reliance and surveillance by the CIA and was involved in a scandal about illegal dossiers and filings against politicians, businessmen and any figure – even the Pontiff – suspected of excessive leftism. Both the practices – unauthorised interceptions and the diffusion of false rumours – and the aims – blackmailing or influencing political appointments – were found illegal by the further investigations. General Giovanni De Lorenzo, for long time head of the

[28] *Ministero della Difesa – circolare interna n. 365 del 30 marzo 1949*.

Service, was a prominent figure in its handling, enhancement, and involvement in national politics, and the dossier scandal was only discovered years later. An even more serious scandal investing the SIFAR was the discovery of the *Piano Solo*, formally a nation-wide emergency plan designed to face possible uprisings. The truth was much more unsettling since the plan, which was to be carried out "only" (*solo*) by the Carabinieri, included the occupation of all the "neuralgic centres" of the country, the establishment of military rule, and the "enucleation" of a number of people, basing on the illegal filings, to the Capo Marrargiu base in Sardinia.

These scandals led to a new change just sixteen years after the creation of the SIFAR, and in 1966 the old service was replaced by the SID[29] (*Servizio Informazioni Difesa*). However, this was not a proper reform as the structures and personnel were the same as those of the SIFAR. The creation of the SID was controversial both because of the name, the same as the service of the Social Republic; and the technical-legislative aspects, as the objectives of the Service were simply defined by a ministerial circular without a parliamentary debate. The SID was also the service that had to deal with the events of the "strategy of tension", in which several extreme right-wing terrorist attacks shook the country in the 1970s and the involvement of some branches of the state has been proved in some instances and remains unclear in others. The attacks of Piazza Fontana in Milan and Piazza Della Loggia in Brescia are just two of the most notorious examples of this, and the contacts of Service officials with some far-right terrorists (outside the sphere of legality as mere informants) are another prominent factor subject to historiographical research and judicial proofing.

The unsettling evidence was undermining the credibility and efficiency of the institution, this time in a disruptive and no longer ignorable manner. This was due to the ramping terrorism and the strategy of tension, the repeated overlaps between the various services, and the growing feeling, within the public opinion, that the secret services constituted an "obscure zone" capable of threatening the democratic stability of the country. Thus, the necessity of an organic reform enshrined in a fully-fledged law, in

[29] *Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 18 novembre 1965, n. 1477*, art. 2(g). Available at https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1966/01/15/065U1477/sg. It is the first time that, along with security and defence of the nation, prevention is mentioned as a duty of the Service.

compliance with the Constitution and the principle of legality, emerged. In 1976 a government bill on the matter was presented, and one year later, with the Law n. 801/1977, two services were established, definitively and clearly distinguishing the military and civil realm – the SISMI (*Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare*) and the SISDE (*Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Democratica*), respectively reporting to Ministry of Defence and of the Interior. The general coordination and responsibility were however given to the Prime Minister through the CESIS (*Comitato Esecutivo per i Servizi di Informazione e Sicurezza*). The law also disciplined state secret and classification, whose regulation had been another pressing issue for decades. This layout has been in force for thirty years, when the reform of 2007 occurred, and considerable improvements were achieved in the general performance, due to a better distinction of competences and a clearer regulation by law. But the SISMI and SISDE had to face tough events as well, witnessing the last years of the strategy of tension, the Moro case, the infiltration by the P2 Lodge, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Gladio case just to cite some. The P2 scandal shattered the public opinion and ran over the newly established services, with their first directors found to be members of the Lodge; the discovery of Gladio, a "stay-behind" organisation created by the SIFAR in secret collaboration with the CIA and then embedded in the 7th Division of the SISMI, raised deep concerns on its legality. Moreover, the new law did not manage to definitively solve the issues on the state secret and illegal dossiers.

What followed is the last reform and current regulation concerning the Italian intelligence system, enshrined in the Law 124/2007 and establishing AISE and AISI. This law has been in force for almost twenty years, significantly improving the overall synergy of the intelligence system and bringing more coherence in the Italian security and intelligence apparatus; it shall be discussed in further detail in the following section.

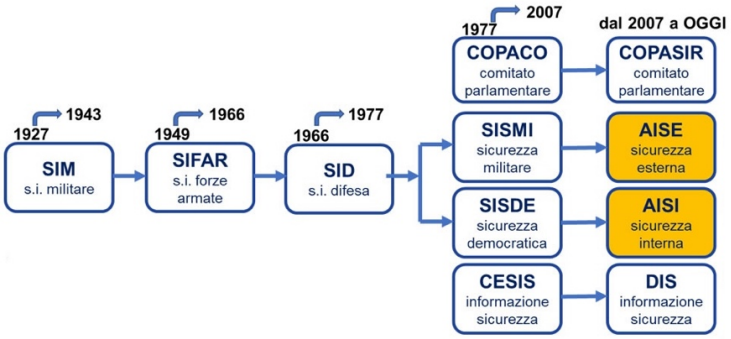

Figure 3: The evolution of Italian intelligence from 1927 onwards (source: https://civitas-schola.it/2021/06/14/sistema-di-informazione-per-la-sicurezza-della-repubblica/).

3.2. Italian Intelligence: A Legislative Overview

Thirty years after the first organic law on intelligence, a new, deep reform took place – the Law 3 August 2007, n. 124 "Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica e nuova disciplina del segreto". Required by the changing international context and the new challenges of the 21st century, the reform has managed in delivering a coherent and efficient architecture for national security, lining up with that of the other NATO countries. First of all, the SISMI and the SISDE were replaced respectively by the AISE (*Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna*) and the AISI (*Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna*); the CESIS was replaced by the DIS (*Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza*). This finally overcame the obsolete, "finalistic" distinction based on the military and civil realms that caused overlaps and inefficiencies, and switched to a territorial criterion, namely external intelligence and internal security. The new law also confers new powers and a stricter control by the Prime Minister, enshrined in Article 1. The President of the Council of Ministers indeed manages the general political direction of the national intelligence policy, appoints the directors and deputy-directors of the agencies, manages the state secret, and sets the overall budget[30], also overcoming the

[30] Law 124/2007, Art. 1. "The President of the Council of Ministers is vested exclusively with
(a) the high direction and overall responsibility for information policy for security, in the interest and defence of the Republic and of the democratic institutions laid down by the Constitution as its foundation;
(b) the affixing and protection of the State Secret;
(c) the confirmation of the opposition of the State Secret;
(d) the appointment and dismissal of the Director-General and one or more Deputy Directors-General of the Department of Security Intelligence;

concurrent handlings by the Ministry of Defence and of the Interior. The PCM can also appoint an Undersecretary for Intelligence ("Delegated Authority") and is aided by the Interministerial Committee for the Security of the Republic. The whole architecture – comprising the Prime Minister, the Undersecretary, the Interministerial Committee, the DIS, and the two Agencies – is supervised by the Parliamentary Committee of Oversight, the COPASIR, and takes the name of SISR (*Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica*).

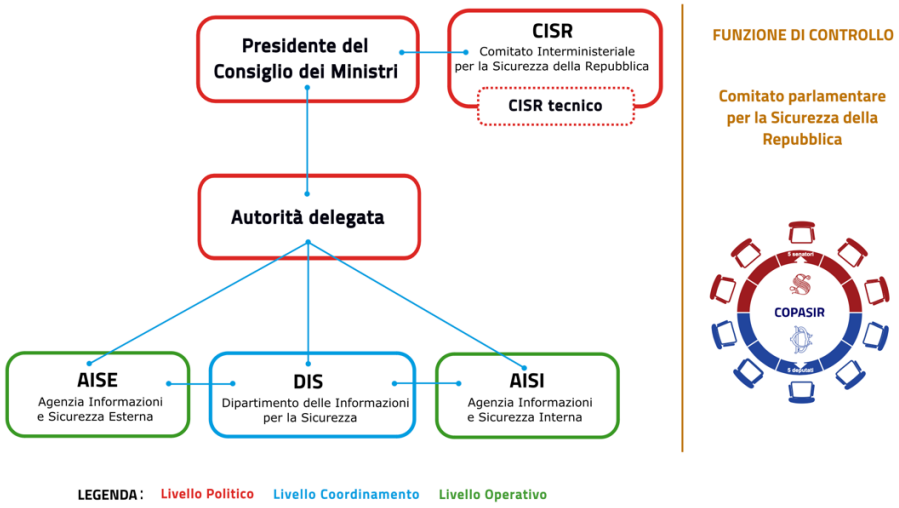

Figure 4: The SISR as enshrined in the Law on Intelligence, n. 124 of 2007 (source: https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/chi-siamo/organizzazione).

The DIS[31] is the department coordinating the two agencies and ensuring the coherent implementation of the planning and targeting phase of the intelligence cycle. It is tasked with controlling their activities and checking their compliance with the directives issued by the Prime Minister, without prejudice to the agencies' competence on the modalities of intelligence collection and on liaison with foreign services. It has also the duty of collecting information, analyses and reports from the two agencies as well as from armed and police forces, other state administrations and research institutes,

(e) Appointment and dismissal of the directors and deputy directors of the Department of Security Intelligence;
(f) determination of the annual amount of the financial resources for the Security Intelligence Services and the Department of Security Intelligence, of which it shall inform the Parliamentary Committee referred to in Article 30.

Available at https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2007;124. Translation is my own.

[31] Law 124/2007, Art. 4.

promoting intelligence sharing among the relevant institutions. Finally, it transmits the final products to the Prime Minister, ultimately carrying out the distribution phase of the cycle.

The AISE[32] is the agency responsible for foreign intelligence and security. It is tasked with research and analysis of all information useful for safeguarding Italy's independence, integrity and security against threats coming from abroad. It reports directly to the Prime Minister or the Delegated Authority, it duly informs the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Defence and of the Interior about the issues of interest as well as delivering a report to the CISR via the DIS. Its director is appointed by the Prime Minister and allocates the posts within the agency. Moreover, due to the new territorial division of competences, military intelligence is now performed by the 2nd Department for Information and Security of the Defence General Staff (thus not being part of the SISR), which however operates in close connection with the AISE and protects military facilities abroad. Notwithstanding the strict territorial criterion, the AISE can exceptionally conduct operations on the national soil, provided that this is done in collaboration with the internal agency, and it is connected to operations being carried out abroad by AISE itself.

The AISI[33] is the agency responsible for internal security and intelligence. It is tasked with research and analysis of all information useful for safeguarding Italy's internal security and its democratic institutions against every subversive activity and form of criminal or terroristic aggression. In addition, the AISI is specifically responsible for identifying and countering foreign espionage against national interests within the country. Like the AISE, it reports to the Prime Minister and briefs the Ministers of the CISR on the matters at stake; in a specular manner, it is forbidden for it to carry out operations abroad, unless it is strictly required by the circumstances and carried out in collaboration with the foreign agency.

[32] Law 124/2007, Art. 6.
[33] Law 124/2007, Art. 7.

For almost twenty years, Italy has been facing the global challenges of the 21st century with this national security architecture. The latter has proven its efficiency on multiple occasions, among which international terrorism, especially after 9/11 and the various attacks in Europe in the 2010s claimed by the Islamic State (IS); international counter-proliferation, aggravated by the growing role of militant non-state actors; the new front of cybersecurity, which led to the establishment of an ad-hoc agency, the ACN; and hostile activities by foreign services on the national soil, which are not new, but have assumed new significance as an instrument that can be used for purposes of hybrid warfare.

However, a prominent instance that has repeatedly tested the effectiveness of Italy's secret services, even before the last reform, is the one of citizens detained, or in the worst cases kidnapped, abroad. Such cases have prompted the services, in particular the foreign one, to undertake a distinctly diplomatic role that has been decisive in the resolution of the cases. This instance shall be the object of the next section.

3.3. Italy and Hostages: The Story of a Challenge

3.3.1. Introduction

Italy certainly is not the only country that had to deal with rescuing nationals abroad – a problem that has always existed and that almost every state has faced at some point in its history. On the other hand, Italy's relationship with facing terrorism and kidnappings is long-standing, and not new to the security establishment. In any case, a distinction must be drawn between terrorism and kidnappings in the Years of Lead and the strategy of tension, and the ones occurring in the era of international terrorism and generally of the 21st century. This thesis concentrates on the latter case by considering three cases of detention or kidnapping of Italian citizens abroad – the kidnapping of Giuliana Sgrena, the kidnapping of Silvia Romano, and the arrest and detention of Cecilia Sala. The discussion entails retracing the dynamics of the case and the contextual role of intelligence. A comparison will then be made with the categories outlined in the previous chapter, in order to assess both the susceptibility to categorisation of some of the ways in

which Italian intelligence operates, and the versatility of such categorisation. Before moving on, two caveats are necessary.

First, the issue of secrecy is all the more present as, besides intelligence being a secret institution, the facts to be discussed are relatively recent and the only sources available are basically journalistic reconstructions, with all the problems that entails; the only exception may be represented by the Sgrena case because of the media resonance emerged. It has been said previously how a proper debate and elaboration – some speak of a "culture of intelligence" – on this realm is missing in Italy, and this can well be seen in conventional newspapers' general way of approaching the matter – without prejudice to the valid elaborations from some other newspapers. The problem does not lie in secrecy itself – a factor that everyone who wants to talk about intelligence must face – rather in a diffused ignorance of the proper role played by these institutions and of their modalities of operation, too often subject to fancy stereotypes. Second, the discussion of these facts is not and should not be considered as constituting a thorough case study also for the scarcity of sources; rather, it shall be seen as tracing some patterns and suggesting possible developments for further study of the practice of intelligence diplomacy, as John A. Gentry has done in his work.

3.3.2. The Case of Giuliana Sgrena

Less than two years after the start, in 2003, of the operation "Iraqi Freedom" led by the US (in which Italy took part with the operation *Antica Babilonia*), the reporter of *il manifesto* Giuliana Sgrena went to Iraq to cover the progress of the war. On February 4th, 2005, when Sgrena's satellite telephone was not reachable, the news of her kidnapping by a commando of the Islamic Jihad Organisation came.

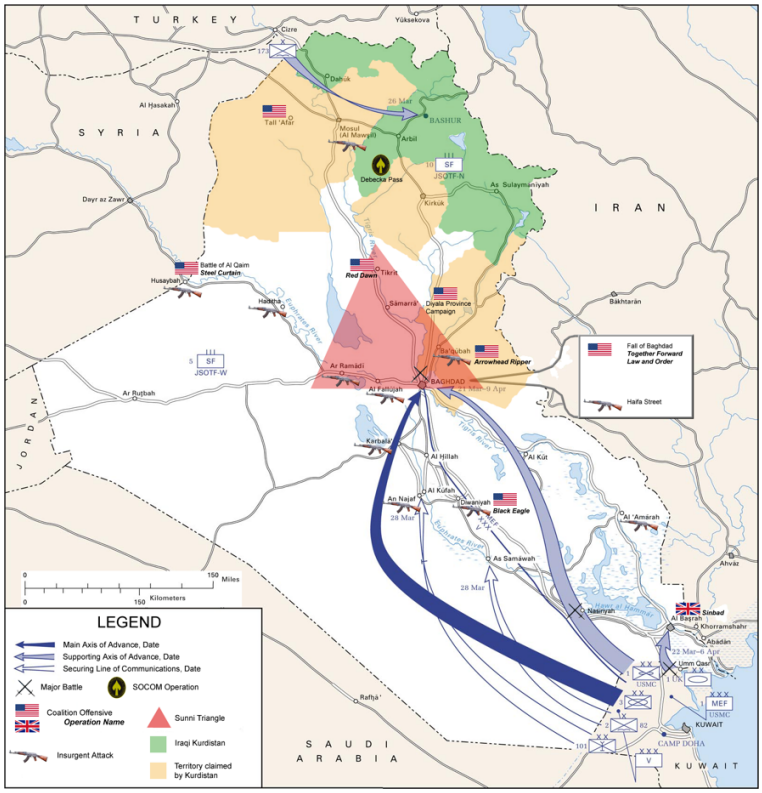

Figure 5: Map of the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" (OIF) in 2007 (source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Iraq-War-Map.png).

On February 10th, the kidnappers requested that the announcement of Italy's contingents' withdrawal be given in 48 hours, and a large manifestation was held in Rome to urge the government and the abductors. On the 15th, Sgrena's father made an appeal as well, and on the 16th something decisive happened. Namely, the journalist was forced to appear in a video speaking in Italian and French and saying "Help me, help me, my life depends on you, please put pressure on the government to withdraw the troops[34]", and the video was broadcast on the Saudi TV *Al Arabiya*. At this point, the pressure by the public opinion, which the commando knew how to fuel and exploit, was significantly high, and a change in the course of action was thus taken. The SISMI took charge of the case, personally handled by Nicola Calipari, a policeman and then-head of the Office "R" ("Research") of the service.

[34] "Aiutatemi, aiutatemi, la mia vita dipende da voi, fate pressione sul governo italiano perché ritiri le truppe". *Il sequestro di Giuliana Sgrena, 20 anni fa*. Il Post, 2025. Available at https://www.ilpost.it/2025/02/04/giuliana-sgrena-sequestro-20-anni-nicola-calipari/. Translation is my own.

During the month of the journalist sequestration, tense mediation dealings were being held between the SISMI, in the person of Calipari, and the kidnappers, likely via the *ulema* Abdel Salam al-Qubaisi, who played a key role as a conduit in this and other hostage cases in Iraq (Menafra, 2006). Indeed, in that period several similar episodes took place within the chaotic situation of the invaded Iraq, and various Western people were abducted. For Calipari himself it was not the first time, as he had already dealt successfully with the freeing of Simona Pari and Simona Torretta[35] and later of Umberto Cupertino, Maurizio Agliana and Salvatore Stefio. The SISMI thus played a distinctly diplomatic role by securing the release of the journalist, otherwise not possible. Indeed, the presence of a terrorist non-state actor prompted the Italian government to choose clandestine diplomacy, along with the perceived capability of the service and the previous mediation experience gained by Calipari. At the end, a deal was reached between the parties (some reconstructions even mention the payment of a ransom, but that has never been confirmed), and Sgrena safely returned to Italy, within a relatively brief time considering the dynamics of such episodes.

The wide resonance sparked by the episode was also due to the tragic death of Calipari, who was mistakenly shot at a checkpoint by an American soldier on his way to the airport of Baghdad in the car with the rescued journalist. More precisely, when the Americans opened the fire on the car, he threw himself on Sgrena to save her, and was killed. The US has always spoken of a "tragic accident", but the circumstances and motives of the action have never been fully clarified. Nicola Calipari has been posthumously awarded the gold medal for military valour.

3.3.3. The Case of Silvia Romano

Another insightful episode is the kidnapping, in Kenya, of the volunteer for the *Africa Milele* NGO Silvia Romano in 2018. On November 20th, Romano was abducted from the village of Chakama by a gang of local criminals probably affiliated to the jihadist

[35] *In memoria di Nicola Calipari*, https://www.senato.it/presidente/discorsi/memoria-di-nicola-calipari. Senato della Repubblica.

group al-Shabaab. The situation was particularly serious and delicate because of the territory already subject to previous kidnappings of foreigners, the unknown identity of the abducting group, and the several movements Romano was forced to make all the way to Somalia and within it. This has contributed to the long duration of the sequestration of approximately eighteen months, during which the public opinion has never stopped keeping attention on the case. The initial reconstructions spoke of a group of local criminals simply interested to obtain a ransom, but later the connections with al-Shabaab, competing with the IS for supremacy in the Somali Peninsula, emerged. Romano said that she was first handed over to three other kidnappers, who brought her to Somalia through a tough journey of approximately four weeks. She reported that, once in Somalia, she changed six hiding places, however without ever being aware of the exact location. Talks by Italian intelligence started in the summer of 2019, and in January 2020 they were convinced that Romano was still alive, arguably also because of a video that the hostage herself would have forwarded.

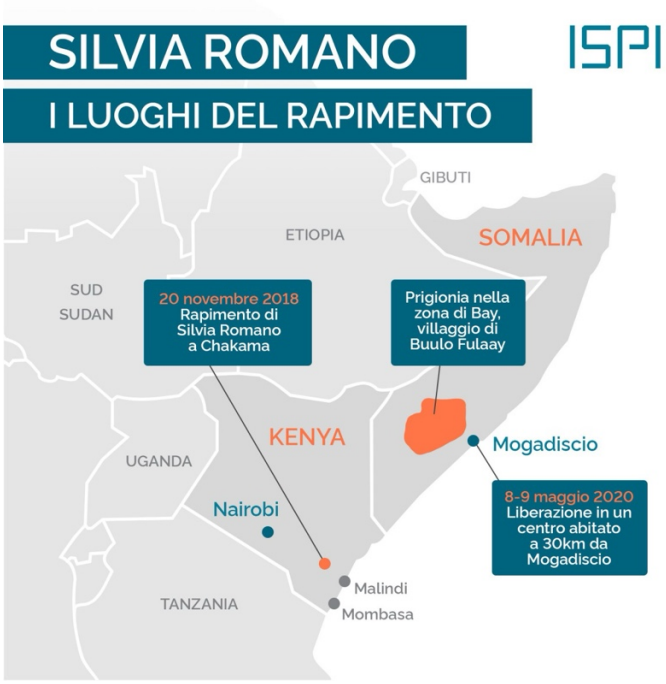

Figure 6: The key moments of the kidnapping and liberation of Silvia Romano between 2018 and 2020 (source: https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/silvia-romano-e-libera-26082).

The liberation of Romano was the result of an intense, months-long activity of the AISE in collaboration with the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (*Milli Istihbarat Teşkilatı*, MIT) and the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (*Hay'ada Sirdoonka iyo Nabadsugida Qaranka*, NISA) (ISPI, 2020). In particular, the Turkish MIT was decisive in the situation, according to Somali sources, and a contact was established upon request of Italian authorities at the end of 2019. The collaboration was confirmed by a declaration of then-Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte referring to the "precious collaboration of Somali and Turkish services", and by a photo of Romano wearing a Turkish bulletproof vest. The role played by Ankara highlighted the importance of Türkiye's positioning in the Africa Horn region. Its involvement starts in 2011 and has been progressively strengthened and intensified through an increased military presence and political-economic collaboration. It is arguable that, leveraging on its solid stance in the country, Ankara has acted via the NISA to engage Qatar in the process as well (ISPI, 2020; Trends Research and Advisory, 2024). Doha was indeed a sympathiser of Islamic actors in Somalia and granted asylum to some leaders of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), something that may have had an influence in establishing a contact with the NISA. On the Somali side, Fahad Yasin, head of the NISA since 2019, was a key figure in that it is deemed to be quite close both to al-Shabaab and Qatar, given his relations with the ICU and the media network *Al-Jazeera*, for which he spent some time in Qatar becoming Doha's trusted man in Mogadishu.

A more complex framework than that of a mere kidnap emerges from these elements. The episode triggered the establishment of an arguably fourfold interlocution between the services of Italy, Türkiye, Somalia, and Qatar, showing the wider geostrategic dynamics present in the region. In this case, besides the "diplomatic" role played by the AISE in engaging with a non-state actor, elements of a (ad-hoc) liaison are detectable. However, it can be assumed that the only standing and deeper connection by AISE is the one with the MIT, given Italy's and Türkiye's shared concerns in the Mediterranean Sea. At the end, a convergence of interests in solving the situation may have been the solving element of the case (ISPI, 2020).

3.3.4. The Case of Cecilia Sala

The most recent episode in this sense is the arrest and detention in Iran of the journalist and reporter Cecilia Sala. Sala had been in Teheran with a regular press visa for a week when she was arrested by Iranian authorities on December 19th, 2024; yet the news was publicly diffused by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only eight years after, on the 27th. The case is particularly interesting for the scope of this analysis as various aspects can be touched regarding intelligence diplomacy, its public stance and, as with Silvia Romano, the importance of the wider framework. Moreover – and maybe counterintuitively – the presence of a *state* actor makes it even more intriguing.

Figure 7: Map of Iran (source: https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran).

First, the fact was initially kept undisclosed as the Italian authorities had initiated talks for the liberation straight after her arrest and, *inter alia*, because there was the suspicion that Teheran could exploit the pressure from public opinion in Italy. On the December 20th, the Crisis Unit of the Foreign Ministry, the Italian Ambassador in Teheran Paola Amadei, and the AISE were already actively following the case. After initial resistance, she was allowed to make two phone calls, and later Ambassador Amadei

visited her in the Evin prison. In the following days, further apprehension derived by seeing that Sala's detention condition were actually tougher than what Iranian authorities had communicated, increasing the pressure and the resolve by the government to unlock the situation. A crucial development, which did not fail to stir up controversy, was the request by the Italian government of "press silence" at a certain point of the negotiations; this was probably the moment when it was realised that the consternation arising – with good reason – among the public opinion in Italy could be artfully exploited and fostered by Iran to pressure the government. It may be interpreted in this sense the declaration[36] by Defence Minister Crosetto, probably trying to dampen this attempt and show the real intentions of Teheran.

A further element of complication, which, according to several scholars and commentators, was the actual reason triggering the arrest in the first place, was the arrest of the Iranian engineer Mohammad Abedini Najafabadi at the Milan Malpensa airport on December 16th – just three days before that of Sala. Abedini had an arrest warrant pending by Washington as he was deemed to traffic war technologies from the US to Iran for terrorism purposes. The connection between the two cases was rumoured for days, and was explicitly acknowledged by Teheran on January 2nd, 2025, when Ambassador Sabouri was called at the Foreign Ministry by Minister Tajani. From this moment onwards, the conditionality of one detainee on the other was no longer ignorable, and Italian authorities had to take that into account as well. According to several journalistic reconstructions and scholars, the connection between the two detainees was certified by the withdrawal of precautionary measures for Abedini by Minister of Justice Nordio on January 12th, just four days after Sala's liberation.

Moving to the intelligence side, which is what this thesis is concerned with, it can be noted that the role played by the AISE has been crucial, and this is noteworthy as the interlocutor was the Islamic Republic of Iran, thus a subject of international law with permanent representations and established diplomatic ties. It would be wrong to say that

[36] "Negotiations with Iran cannot, unfortunately, be resolved through the involvement of Western public opinion and the force of popular outrage, but only through high-level political and diplomatic action." Thus Minister Crosetto on X (https://x.com/guidocrosetto/status/1872621062992642108?s=46). Translation is my own.

intelligence does not typically engage with conventional actors. However, paying closer attention, the peculiarity of its intervention can be noted. Indeed, in Iran remarkable influence is exercised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (the "Pasdaran"), a military and paramilitary force reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, making them an indispensable interlocutor when dealing with security issues. Although part of the regular Iranian army, they are considered a terrorist organisation by the US[37] and some other countries, and persons such as Abedini would be part of the clandestine procurement network set up by Iran, according to former SISMI officer Marco Mancini. Such features of the IRGC and the context in which they operated thus made intelligence a suitable actor for negotiating on this issue. According to some journalistic reconstructions, what mattered were the personal connections between AISE director Giovanni Caravelli and the IRGC intelligence, acquired throughout his career. Caravelli would make several trips between Rome and Teheran to negotiate with its security establishment and act as warranty for the detainee. Cecilia Sala was finally released after three weeks of detention, on January 8th, 2025. Compared to other cases of detention in Iran, Sala's liberation occurred in an extremely short timeframe.

4. Key Findings

These three cases illustrate the diplomatic role that intelligence is sometimes called to play when particular circumstances arise. In this last section, a general overview of these circumstances is provided and a balance is drawn; moreover, the cases are confronted against the categorisation proposed in the previous chapter.

It has been seen how the presence of a terrorist non-state actors usually triggers the intervention of intelligence by national governments; however, the particular configuration of a state security apparatus and its stance on the international arena can also prompt governments to choose it for discussing issues such as the detention of a citizen, which is in the end a security matter as well. In particular, the long story of Italy dealing with hostages confirms the concern that states experience in the highest manner

[37] United States Department of the Treasury (2019), *Treasury Designates the IRGC under Terrorism Authority and Targets IRGC and Military Supporters under Counter-Proliferation Authority*. https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0177.aspx

when their nationals go through problems abroad. Indeed, the citizen, along with territory, is an essential component of state sovereignty, and his protection is considered to be of such vital interest to the state that it triggers the intervention of the quintessential national-interest-oriented institutions. Such view can be understood from an article by director Caravelli on the magazine *Formiche* where, in recalling the action of Calipari, he elaborates on the usage of hostages as a strategic weapon: "In the chaos of irregular, asymmetrical or hybrid wars, between militias, brigands, terrorists and traffickers of various kinds, the hostage becomes a 'currency', its value determined by the government that claims it, the political weight it embodies, the media attention it can attract.[38]" This can apply also in the case of detainees, even more with Iran, which has been repeatedly said to exploit the practice of "hostage diplomacy" (Therme, 2024).

The article touches and seems to confirm other interesting points referred to in this analysis, such as the importance of the wider context ("Each hostage is a negotiating card, a piece in a mosaic that goes beyond a single human life[39]"); the sovereignty claim ("A democratic government has the duty to care for its citizens and not to leave them behind. Firmness towards those who use kidnapping as a weapon must never turn into indifference, because the state exists to protect its sons[40]"); and even the conjectures on the payment of ransoms ("Some criminal groups in Latin America or Africa, such as those involved in kidnappings, operate for mere profit and can be persuaded with the right price[41]"). The final consideration is that "behind every liberation there is an invisible battle, fought in the shadows, and often won at the price of hard compromises[42]".

Precious insights also emerged in a conversation and subsequently in an interview with Professor Niccolò Petrelli, Lecturer at the Department of Political Science of Roma

[38] "Nel caos delle guerre irregolari, asimmetriche o ibride, tra milizie, briganti, terroristi e trafficanti di vario tipo, l'ostaggio diventa una "moneta", il suo valore determinato dal governo che lo reclama, dal peso politico che incarna, dall'attenzione mediatica che può attirare." Caravelli, 2025. Translation is my own.
[39] "Ogni ostaggio è una carta negoziale, un tassello in un mosaico che va oltre la singola vita umana." Ibid. Translation is my own.
[40] "Un governo democratico ha il dovere di interessarsi dei suoi cittadini e di non lasciarli indietro. La fermezza di fronte a chi usa il rapimento come arma non deve mai trasformarsi in indifferenza, perché lo stato esiste per proteggere i suoi figli." Ibid. Translation is my own.
[41] "Alcuni gruppi criminali in America latina o in Africa, come quelli coinvolti nei sequestri lampo, operano per mero guadagno e possono essere persuasi con il giusto prezzo." Ibid. Translation is my own.
[42] "[D]ietro ogni liberazione c'è una battaglia invisibile, combattuta nell'ombra, e spesso vinta al prezzo di compromessi difficili." Ibid. Translation is my own.

Tre University and specialised in strategic and intelligence studies. In addressing the phenomenon of intelligence diplomacy, Petrelli highlighted how this should not be considered a trend, rather one of the functions that secret services have repeatedly performed besides informing the political decisionmaker and conducting covert action. Depending on the requirements of the circumstances, governments can decide to attach more importance to one or more of those functions; however, according to Petrelli, covert diplomacy is hardly ever the main function of a secret service. When asked about the relevance of this practice for understanding the diplomatic and security culture of a state, he identified as its main causes the institutional setup of a state and specific contingencies; however, in some cases, such as in the Soviet Union and in today's Russia, the predilection for special operations may explain certain setups of secret services, shedding light on the strategic culture of the country.

Asked about Italy, Petrelli noted that it was difficult to assess the extent of the phenomenon because of the high degree of secrecy surrounding these actions and the small amount of declassified documentation available. It can be seen, however, that from the late 1970s, the SISMI engaged in such diplomatic activities. This was not by chance, as the reform of 1977 introduced a direct link between intelligence and the political leadership of the Prime Minister. Before that, with secret services reporting to the Ministry of Defence, intelligence diplomacy basically consisted in intelligence liaison. Today, this practice continues with the AISE and, as it emerged in a conversation before the interview, it is characterised by a more pronounced operational nature, as it can be seen in the hostage episodes. Moreover, this stance may be seen as a historical consequence of the military realm having always been present in Italian intelligence, which is present still today (the current director and deputy directors are all army generals) and sometimes overcomes the function of informing the political leadership to assume a more operationally oriented one.

Regarding the kidnappings and arrests of nationals abroad, Petrelli interestingly highlighted how such episodes assumed a wholly new valence and attention with the role of media nowadays. This is due to the permanent and ubiquitous nature that the news has today, consequently making what happens to nationals abroad immediately detectable and

communicable through media. This has become a complicating element: given that the leakage of information can endanger or at least influence the success of the operation, as the Sala case and Iran's awareness of that showed, delegating the resolution of such issues to secret institutions yields considerable advantage. Moreover, regarding the Sala case, Petrelli warned that the role of the personal connection by Caravelli with Iranian intelligence not be overestimated, or at least not totally ascribed to the realm of intelligence. Indeed, such connections may have developed even outside that realm, when both actors had not joined intelligence yet and were still in their military careers.

In conclusion, if confronted against the scheme proposed in the previous chapter, it can be seen how the diplomatic role played by Italian intelligence well fits into those categories. The variable of access is surely among the most frequent encouraging statesmen to employ spies as diplomats and does not constitute a real novelty given intelligence contacts with potentially every kind of actor. The same can be said about secrecy, even more valuable in the time of omnipresent media. Credibility and trust were particularly present in the Sala case, entailing a state with an influential security establishment, Iran, and an intelligence director, Caravelli, with personal acquaintances in that realm. The variable shared by all three cases is the one of functional importance of issues, being the protection of citizen a vital interest and duty of the state as said above. Lastly, on the side of Iran, hostage diplomacy may be regarded as a form of strategic signalling, a peculiar practice repeatedly adopted by a state to make requests and send messages in a recognisable manner. In this regard, the expression *unplausible deniability* by Gentry is particularly interesting.

Generally speaking, Gentry's view is confirmed as these variables do not appear as pure types, rather as interacting with each other and as embedded in the context. Italy can thus be said to perform intelligence diplomacy through a backchannel or even clandestine approach.

Conclusion

This dissertation has addressed the diplomatic and foreign policy role that sometimes intelligence organisations are called to play by national governments. By

discussing some aspects of the Italian case, it has been seen how this role has often to do with the protection of the citizen – a fundamental duty of the state – and is encouraged by the presence of unconventional actors even within the state bureaucracy, as in Iran with the Sala case. Variables such as access to certain interlocutors, secrecy in carrying out the negotiations, the perceived importance of the issue treated, and the capabilities of the secret service along with the personal contacts that its officials can have, all of them intertwined to various extents, are some answers to the question guiding this thesis, which can be outlined as "what encourages states to use intelligence as a diplomatic actor?".

Talking about Italy entails some challenges, such as dealing with a context where intelligence is under-theorised and not duly understood because of a certain historical legacy, and with a general scarcity of sources, which is however a widespread problem in intelligence studies given the classification problem. On the other side, this produced interesting findings related to the contemporary course of action of Italian services, showing their diplomatic and operational side sometimes overcoming the informational one, as it emerged from the three cases discussed, the interview with Professor Petrelli and some journalistic reconstructions.

Further research will surely benefit from the progressive declassification of foreign policy documentation related to more recent happenings and could address wider phenomena than those discussed in this thesis. More precisely, it would be insightful to detect patterns in the involvement of intelligence in wider foreign policy strategies pursued by the Italian Republic. However, due to the large amount of time that declassification needs to occur, this risks to be only addressed from a historiographical perspective and to be neglected by intelligence studies practitioners. It is desirable that this does not occur, as the contribution that such elaboration would bring to strategic and security studies would be invaluable also beyond the historical lens.

To conclude, the diplomatic stance of intelligence services is set to play an increasingly important role in the future. This is due to the complexity of an interdependent world, where the multiplicity of actors, both statal and non-statal, forces international relations to seek new channels. The information-oriented nature of

intelligence organisations, which has been demonstrated to be a feature shared with diplomacy and foreign policy, will hopefully serve as a stabilising factor in an unstable global scenario.

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Annex: Transcript of the Interview with Professor Niccolò Petrelli[43]

Puzzo: What kind of trend is "intelligence diplomacy", and which states implement it most? What can this tell us about a state's diplomatic and security culture?

Petrelli: Covert diplomacy is not a "trend", rather it is a function that intelligence apparatuses have very often performed throughout history. The point is that intelligence apparatuses typically perform a variety of functions, among which covert diplomacy, information collection, or covert operation. Which one is carried out more frequently depends on the main function of the intelligence service, something that varies among states. For instance, in the case of today's Russia and previously of the Soviet Union, there is a clear prevalence of special or covert operations. I wouldn't be able to think about a secret service where the main function is that of covert diplomacy; at most, it is a function that is quite often carried out, especially in Europe – for instance by the MI6, the DGSE, the AISE and before that the SISMI. Regarding the diplomatic and security culture of a state, it does not actually tell us very much. How often this is performed stems, on the one hand, from the institutional set-up of a state, on the other it is the product of specific contingencies. The example I made you last time [in a previous conversation] is the one of the Mossad. The diplomatic role performed by the Mossad in Lebanon from mid-1970s onwards was due to the contingencies of the time. By contingencies, I mean that, for a number of reasons, the Mossad had developed contacts with the Lebanese Phalanx and the Maronite Christians, and that it was thus deemed natural and appropriate that the Mossad would continue to develop them. The same discourse can be made about the direction of Efraim Halevy, a diplomat serving as Mossad director between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s; the setting and function he prioritised was indeed that of covert diplomacy. But this is a quite normal thing in the realm of secret services; for instance, the first CIA Director coming from within the ranks of the Agency, Richard Helms, appointed in 1966, had made his entire career in intelligence and covert information collection, and gave priority to that function, which was previously downplayed in favour of special and paramilitary operations. This depended on his view, according to which the Agency should have been more responsible for that collection role

[43] The interview was held telephonically on May 23rd, 2025, in Italian. Translation is my own.

and less for covert operations. In the end we could say that sometimes it depends on what one can call the strategic and security culture of a state; other times on more contingent factors, like on who has the best contacts among the various institutions or on how the director aims to configure the apparatus in that moment.

Puzzo: Thank you. I'll deviate just a moment from the scheduled questions. When saying "trend", I was mainly referring to how the literature approaches the matter and to the "category" of diplomacy that the literature considers as under-theorised and as something to elaborate on.

Petrelli: I understand. As you may have noted, intelligence studies are not that theorised. It is a field that tends to have a more empirical or historical approach, and in comparative terms intelligence is hardly theorised.

Puzzo: Exactly. As a next question, I would like to ask which extent has this phenomenon had throughout history and today in Italy?

Petrelli: This is a very wide and hard question. It is difficult to know much, as foreign operations are the activities of intelligence about which declassification has occurred the least. Basing on the available documentation, we know that starting from the late 1970s, it is a function that the SISMI has carried out in an increasingly frequent manner, in the area today referred to as "enlarged Mediterranean Sea" [*Mediterraneo allargato*]. This started to occur after the 1977 reform, when the intelligence system came under closer direction by the political leadership with a direct link with the President of the Council of Ministers; this strengthened that function. Before that, intelligence diplomacy was mainly focused on maintaining links with other foreign secret services, and limited to inter-intelligence cooperation – what we would call today *intelligence liaison*. From 1977 onwards, covert diplomacy assumed a wider role by entertaining contacts with other actors as well – politicians, local actors of various kinds, even non-governmental ones, militias and the like.

Puzzo: To go into further detail – even though you already touched on that in the first question – what could we identify as being the main reasons for the usage of such practice?

Petrelli: The more diplomatic stance of secret services in Italy, as I said, emerges when the system gets reformed and a direct link with the government is established. Previously, intelligence reported to the Ministry of Defence and the Chief of Defence General Staff [*Capo di Stato Maggiore della Difesa*], thus being relegated to the military realm and not performing a fully-fledged diplomatic activity.

Puzzo: I understand. Could we say that the dependence from the Defence Ministry and in general from the military realm, which has always characterised the foreign secret service in Italy, partly remains still today, and partly explains the more operational attitude of Italian intelligence, about which we spoke last time [in a previous conversation]? Indeed, the current director and deputy-directors of AISE are all army generals.

Petrelli: I would not say that. We have to note that nowadays the number of civil officials in the whole intelligence system has significantly increased. On one side, given that military officials have been for decades more present in the foreign secret service (and police officials in the internal security one), a prevalence may still be present. Such military prevalence, moreover, is present also in the French DGSE. Nevertheless, these are not fixed rules but general occurrences due to the specific professional competences of the various officials. For instance, there is the case of the current AISI director, Bruno Valensise, who is a civil official and actually the first civil director of the internal security agency. Specularly, Nicola Calipari, for instance, was a police official but was appointed head of SISMI 2nd Division, the one responsible for foreign collection. The same can be said for the leadership of the System [the SISR], namely the directors of the DIS (and previously the secretary-generals of the CESIS), who are generally senior public officials coming from various institutions. Sometimes they were ambassadors, but also prefects, or Carabinieri Generals. This is due to the fact that both the DIS and the CESIS are purely coordinating bodies. The fundamental competence requested is thus not necessarily an

intelligence one, rather being able to efficiently run a public body, ensuring coordination among state bureaucracy and interfacing with the political leadership.

Puzzo: Exactly. This entails also ensuring coordination among the two Agencies.

Petrelli: Certainly. Of course, this is an institution of a particular kind, being the secret service coordination body, and even higher abilities are demanded to run such organisation.

Puzzo: I understand. When I was talking about the army's prevalence, I was referring to history and wondering if that could represent a historical heredity.

Petrelli: This is correct. We have to bear in mind that the AISE is the SISMI's successor, and the SISMI was not only the foreign secret service, but the military one as well, as the name says. The military inheritance can thus be said to be present in the AISE.

Puzzo: I would now like to touch upon another instance. Some journalistic sources have shown some trips made by intelligence officials, such as that of AISE director Caravelli in Niger or that of former DIS director Belloni in Croatia. What can we say about these instances? Is this part of an alternative diplomatic strategy?

Petrelli: In the light of the very few information available it is impossible to determine that. I would not say, according to my view, that this is part, as you said, of an "alternative diplomatic strategy", and it is hard to determine that. My view would be that this is more related to handling certain specific issues. Intelligence intervenes when there is the need of handling particularly delicate aspects of diplomatic relations with another state. Normally, diplomatic relations are the task of foreign ministries; secret services enter this dynamic when there are delicate aspects that the political leadership prefers to discuss in a reserved manner. These matters do not have to be necessarily intelligence questions, and this is a fundamental aspect. The point is that intelligence organisations are secret institutions, and their involvement is the way in which a political leader can move confidentially in a variety of matters. The need for secrecy thus explains choosing this

actor, and it would not be correct to say that their usage is an “alternative diplomatic strategy”.

Puzzo: As a last question, I would like to touch upon another issue, that of Italian nationals detained or kidnapped abroad, which has occurred frequently. My question is thus: what (diplomatic) role do Italian intelligence services play in this issue?

Petrelli: I would deliver this interpretation. My opinion is that, not only in Italy, the role of secret services in such issues has significantly increased along with the proliferation of media. What I mean is that, to make a random example, the kidnap of a national working at a dam in Peru at the time of Sendero Luminoso would have been way less publicised, since media coverage was not instantaneous, ubiquitous and omnipresent as today. This way, it was a matter that conventional diplomacy could also have dealt with, and information capable of conditioning the success of negotiations was less likely to exfiltrate. Today, these are matters that must necessarily be treated by secret organisms. The case of Giuliana Sgrena is emblematic in this sense, because those terrorist militias took great advantage and leveraged on the “mediatisation” of the kidnap. The public opinion, the civil society and the political opposition of the country of the kidnapped person make pressure on the government, and this can be exploited by those militias. The handling by secret services shields the government from such problems and allows it to have a firmer control on negotiations.

Puzzo: This is very interesting. We could say that the change in media coverage have kind of determined a shift in statesmen’s decision about which organ should handle a certain situation.

Petrelli: We often hear that, with permanent and ubiquitous information, secret services are shifting towards OSINT. Certainly, being intelligence services mainly concerned with information, the so-called information society has changed their work under various aspects. Sometimes we also hear that intelligence is now better performed by some private institutes or other subjects such as academic centres and the like. However, the information society has also made more valuable the ability by secret services to act

secretly. Indeed, secrecy becomes a valuable asset in a society where everything is known immediately and can go viral in a few minutes.

Puzzo: Certainly. This has been seen also in the case of Cecilia Sala, when at some point the government requested the "silence of the press", not without controversies.

Petrelli: Yes, because otherwise negotiations would have turned way harder.

Puzzo: This was interesting also under another aspect, as the actor was still a statal one – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, although labelled as a terrorist organisation by some states.

Petrelli: Yes, Iran is a state actor and thus more easily manageable than a militia, where contacts are harder to maintain and every information exfiltrated is potentially harmful. This was clearly seen in the Sgrena's case.

Puzzo: Another factor that emerged in the Sala's case was the personal relationship between AISE director Caravelli with his Iranian counterpart.

Petrelli: We have to be cautious in this respect, as this has been quite overstated by the press. It is absolutely normal to develop relationships in the working environment, and these relationships are susceptible to influence the outcomes. Almost everything about secret services published on [Italian] media must be taken with a grain of salt, and the representation they provide is somehow rooted and repeated. Sometimes we must "read through the lines" to understand the actual situation. It is true that director Caravelli had a relationship with his Iranian counterpart, but that should not be overstated as an exceptional and unconventional feature. The way they may have known each other could be of every kind, for example they may have met at a conference or at a course when they both had a completely different role. This is without prejudice to the abilities of anyone – sometimes the capacity to maintain a personal contact can have a weight, but we cannot know the way in which this occurred.