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The Dynamics of Adaptation and Reform of Intelligence Agencies (1947-2024)

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The Dynamics of Adaptation and Reform of Intelligence Agencies (1947-2024)

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ABSTRACT. This article analyzes the dynamics of reform and adaptation in intelligence services from 1947 to 2024, aiming to identify recurring patterns in the institutional transformations applied to these agencies. To this end, a theoretical review and a comparative analysis of 31 case studies were conducted. Based on empirical work, two key explanatory axes are constructed: centralization versus decentralization and specialization versus multifunctionality, within which different structural variants are situated. The results show a pendulum-like pattern in the reforms implemented, driven by security crises, technological advances, and political changes. It is concluded that there is no single model for intelligence organization, but rather a constant adaptation toward hybrid configurations that combine centralized control, functional specialization, and inter-institutional cooperation.

Keywords: government; institutional adaptation; intelligence services; international security; state security

RESUMEN. Este artículo analiza las dinámicas de adaptación y reforma en los servicios de inteligencia desde 1947 hasta 2024, con el objetivo de identificar patrones recurrentes en las transformaciones institucionales aplicadas a estas agencias. Para ello, se realizó una revisión teórica y un análisis comparado de 31 estudios de caso. A partir del trabajo empírico se construyen dos ejes explicativos clave: centralización frente a descentralización y especialización frente a multifunción, en los que se ubican diferentes variantes estructurales. Los resultados muestran un patrón pendular en las reformas que se activan, impulsadas por crisis de seguridad, avances tecnológicos y cambios políticos. Se concluye que no existe un modelo único de organización de inteligencia, sino una constante adaptación hacia configuraciones híbridas que combinan control centralizado, especialización funcional y cooperación interinstitucional.

Palabras clave: adaptación institucional; gobierno; seguridad del Estado; seguridad internacional; servicios de inteligencia

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Introduction

All organizations are subject to a permanent process of adaptation to the environment in which they are embedded, as this is the only way they can continue to provide their services and products competitively and, consequently, enjoy legitimacy and avoid disappearance (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009; Selznick, 1948). The organizational environment is shaped both by other actors with whom they maintain relations of competition and collaboration and by environmental, cultural, and political factors that condition their responses to certain demands, risks, and opportunities (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Heimann, 1997; Powell & DiMaggio, 1994).

In this regard, intelligence services are no different from any other organization and, practically since their birth after World War II, they have undergone continuous adaptations, most of them as a result of scandals, changes in political regimes, or intelligence failures. The starting premise of this article is that the adaptations and responses employed so far by intelligence services and communities have followed a logic framed within the different theories and models that, generically, are grouped under the so-called "organization theory". Specifically, these have been transaction cost economics (Williamson & Masten, 1981), population ecology theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1989), resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and neo-institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1994), primarily.

Reforms have focused on different dimensions, such as human resources, economic resources, technology, and legal instruments (Herman, 1996, p. 199). However, many of these initiatives and proposals have, almost generally, addressed mainly the structural dimension:

> Although many of the proposals for the 'reform' of the intelligence community have proven difficult to implement, structure appears to have been a frequent target of reforms and reorganizations, perhaps because structural problems are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as easier to solve. (Hammond, 2010, p. 682)

Nevertheless, despite the continuous reforms and adaptations that both intelligence communities and national services have experienced over the last eighty years, the attention dedicated to intelligence as an organization has been less than that paid to other areas of intelligence studies. This deficit explains why, after so many decades, most key questions remain unresolved and an evident lack of theoretical research and empirical analysis persists (Cremades-Guisado & Cancelado-Franco, 2021; Döhler, 2020; Hammond, 2010), leading to a lack of typologies and analytical frameworks. Advancement in new models of adaptation for intelligence services to face future challenges is necessarily paired with a greater understanding of the dynamics these agencies have experienced in recent decades. This article presents two axes that allow for the explanation of these dynamics and help fill this existing gap in intelligence studies.

Methodology

The dynamics of adaptation and reform analyzed in this article were identified through a two-phase process. First, reports from oversight commissions, parliamentary reports, reform proposals, as well as legislative reforms from recent decades and the most relevant scientific literature were reviewed. This documentation process allowed for the identification of five recurring dynamics of change, along with the extremes between which each moves. Table 1 presents each dynamic with the periods in which it was identified with greatest intensity, the problem the dynamic sought to resolve, the implemented solution, and the potential problem that could motivate a new crisis and, therefore, a return toward the opposite extreme of the dynamic.

Specifically, the identified dynamics were: 1) centralization vs. decentralization, 2) regional vs. functional, 3) multifunction vs. specific agencies, 4) public vs. outsourcing, and 5) centralized knowledge vs. distributed knowledge system. To confirm this typology, 31 brief case studies were conducted. The objective was not to perform an exhaustive analysis of all intelligence agencies in the world nor of all adaptations experienced over the last eight decades, but to identify historical cases that allowed for testing and illustrating the proposed typology. Case selection was intentional, seeking a variety of reforms and adaptations in countries responding to diverse geopolitical environments, well-known crises, and different bureaucratic models, as well as cases that, due to their impact and temporal location, for example, transitions to democracy—could illuminate different types of adaptation. In order not to excessively increase the length of the article, few sources are used in the case studies, given that they are widely known cases that are easily documented.

Table 1. Organizational dynamics in intelligence services (1947-2024)

Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic
Centralization vs. decentralization	1947-1956	Dispersion of information and analytical authority	Centralize in / decentralize central structures	Continuous back-and-forth process
Regional vs. functional	1970-1989	Lack of structural adaptation to threats	Creation of special centers or units	Highly reactive response and slow adaptation
Multifunction vs. specific agencies	2001	Specificity of threats	Internal security concept, fusion centers, specialized bodies	Loss of foresight and vision beyond borders. Very focused on police missions
Public vs. outsourcing	2001	Lack of resources, flexibility, and knowledge	Hiring personnel and outsourcing functions and tasks	Loss of knowledge, loss of process control, excessive dependency

Table continues...

Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic	Organizational Dynamic
Centralized knowledge vs. distributed knowledge system	2003	Lack of communication on complex threats	Create an online community, top-down and bottom-up	High internal cooperation, but no external alliances are generated

Source: Own elaboration

Case studies on intelligence service reforms

Succinct case studies are developed below to exemplify the different types of dynamics conceptually described in Table 1. These five dynamics were useful for guiding the search and analysis of the most relevant information; however, after the preparation of the case studies, the existence of two major axes was identified that allow for their collective interpretation: Axis I "Centralization vs. decentralization" and Axis II "Specialization vs. multifunction". For this reason, although the expository logic could have led to presenting them chronologically or alphabetically, the choice was made to group them around these two axes to describe them in greater detail in the following section.

Table 2 shows the case studies associated with each of the two identified axes. To facilitate the understanding of the table, it is briefly indicated that "political centralization" is understood as the creation of coordinating bodies or a single leadership (centralization axis); "operational centralization" as the unification of agencies or the creation of centers that coordinate operations; "operational decentralization" as the dispersion of functions, including outsourcing; "specialization" as the creation of agencies with a more limited scope of action ; and "multifunction agency" as the merging of diverse functions into a single entity.

Table 2. Identification and classification of case studies in the two axes

Axis I. Centralization vs. decentralization		
Country	Year	Variant
United States	1947	Political centralization
Spain	1977	Organizational centralization
Italy	1977	Political centralization
Australia	1980	Political centralization
Russia	1991-1992	Operational decentralization
Canada	2000	Operational centralization
United States	2001	Operational decentralization
Spain	2002	Political centralization

Table continues...

Axis I. Centralization vs. decentralization		
United Kingdom	2003	Operational centralization
United States	2004	Organizational centralization
Spain	2004	Organizational centralization
Belgium	2006	Operational centralization
Italy	2007	Political centralization
France	2008	Political centralization
New Zealand	2009	Political centralization
United Kingdom	2010	Political centralization
India	2010	Operational decentralization
Argentina	2011-2021	Political centralization
Japan	2013	Political centralization
Indonesia	2020	Political centralization
Australia	2024	Operational decentralization
Axis II. Specialization vs. multifunction		
Country	Year	Variant
Italy	1977	Specialization
France	1982	Specialization
Canada	1984	Multifunction agency
Poland	1990	Specialization
Germany	1990-1994	Specialization
South Africa	1995	Specialization
United States	2003	Specialization
United States	2004	Specialization
Germany	2004	Specialization
France	2008	Multifunction agency
United Kingdom	2017-2021	Specialization

Source: Own elaboration

Axis I. Centralization vs. decentralization

United States (1947)

At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States undertook a profound reorganization of its national security structure, partly due to the lessons of World War II and, especially, the intelligence failures that led to Pearl Harbor, as well as the need to confront the growing Soviet threat. Before the approval of the National Security Act of 1947, which created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), American intelligence was fragmented between military services and the State Department, and no central agency existed to collect information or prevent service rivalry. The 1947 reform centralized national-level intelligence in the CIA,

a multifunctional agency that combined analysis, HUMINT, and covert actions. With this structure, the country moved from a pre-war decentralized model to a more centralized and multifunctional organization, led by the CIA, for the production of strategic intelligence (Richelson, 2018).

Spain (1977)

Following the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975, the new Spanish democratic government needed to profoundly reform a security apparatus oriented toward controlling internal dissent. Multiple security and intelligence entities—military information services, political police, among others—duplicated functions, leading to the creation of the Higher Defense Information Center (Centro Superior de Información de la Defensa, CESID) in July 1977 via Royal Decree. This was the first unified national intelligence service in Spain, integrating the former Central Documentation Service (SECED) from the late Francoist era and various military intelligence units under the Ministry of Defense. The reform centralized intelligence collection and analysis in a single body that combined internal and external functions, preventing Ministry of the Interior agencies from assuming this sphere of intelligence (Díaz-Fernández, 2005).

Italy (1977)

The creation of the CESIS (Comitato Esecutivo per i Servizi di Informazione e Sicurezza), under the authority of the prime minister, sought to align the work of intelligence agencies—SISMI and SISDE—which were focused on the external and internal spheres, respectively. This structure explicitly placed the prime minister at the head of intelligence policy and its coordination, in response to the previous lack of political control. The new system operationally decentralized intelligence into two specialized agencies—one oriented toward the interior and the other toward the exterior—but centralized strategic oversight in the figure of the prime minister, thus introducing a new dynamic in the Italian system (Pisano, 1978; Sidoti, 2009).

Australia (1980)

Starting in the 1980s and as a result of the Hope Commission report, Australia promoted the centralization of political control over intelligence agencies: ASIO (internal security), ASIS (external intelligence), and DSD (signals intelligence). Furthermore, these agencies were physically relocated to Canberra with the objective of bringing them closer to the governmental decision-making center (Jones, 2010; Walsh, 2021).

Russia (1991-1992)

The Soviet KGB was an archetype of a highly centralized and multifunctional intelligence agency, managing everything from foreign espionage to domestic surveillance, secret po-

lice, and signals intelligence. The failed coup d'état of August 1991—led in part by the KGB—ultimately discredited this body and led to its dissolution. Its functions were divided between the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK), renamed in 1995 as the Federal Security Service (FSB), which assumed internal security and counterintelligence; the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), created for foreign intelligence; and the KGB's Third Directorate (military counterintelligence), which passed to the Ministry of Defense. Although a Ministry of Security was created in 1992 to coordinate these new agencies, it had a brief existence, as in 1995 the FSB emerged as the main heir to internal security functions, led by former KGB officer and current President Vladimir Putin (Riehle, 2022).

Canada (2000)

In the 2000s, Canada further strengthened the oversight and coordination of its intelligence system. Following the September 11 attacks, the government created the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC) to facilitate intelligence exchange between agencies, and in 2019, it established the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA), a unique body tasked with reviewing all government security and intelligence activities. These changes reflect the Canadian effort to centralize information exchange—through the ITAC—while maintaining a decentralized structure of agencies, such as the CSIS for security intelligence or the CSE for signals intelligence (Hensler, 1995; Robinson, 2009).

United States (2001)

This intelligence system constitutes the most characteristic case of this dynamic following the September 11 attacks. After 2001, up to 70% of the intelligence budget was allocated to private contractors (Chesterman, 2008). Private companies began to perform essential tasks in SIGINT collection, threat analysis, and technological support. This "intelligence privatization" motivated debates over which activities should remain inherently governmental functions. Notably, a 2007 study revealed that contractors performed approximately 40% of analytical functions within the Intelligence Community (Storm, 2018; Van Puyvelde, 2019). Although attempts have since been made to reduce that proportion, contractors continue to provide a significant portion of information processing and technical operations. Control and oversight issues were virtually continuous until 2013, when the leaks by Edward Snowden—a former NSA contractor—occurred, resulting in a 2014 legal obligation for contractors to report security compromises in their systems (e.g., unauthorized access to classified data).

Spain (2002)

During the 1980s and 1990s, CESID was involved in various scandals, particularly the illegal wiretapping of prominent figures and the GAL case, in which state officials participated in a dirty war against ETA. By the late 1990s, consensus grew in favor of a legal reform that

would provide clearer rules for its operations. Although the new government of José María Aznar, elected in 1996, began drafting an intelligence reform law, it was not approved at that time. It was not until the months following the September 11, 2001, attacks that the approval of a reform, whose roots were not exclusively in those attacks, was accelerated. In 2002, two key laws were enacted: one strengthening prior judicial control and, of interest in this analysis, Law 11/2002, which created the National Intelligence Center (Centro Nacional de Inteligencia, CNI) to replace CESID. This law also created the Government Delegate Commission for Intelligence Affairs, whose objective is to articulate the intelligence community; in this Commission, chaired by the Vice President of the Government, the CNI holds a determining weight (Díaz-Fernández, 2024).

United Kingdom (2003)

One of the changes derived from the September 11 attacks was the creation, in 2003, of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), established within the MI5 headquarters. The JTAC is a multi-agency intelligence center exclusively dedicated to assessing the terrorist threat, integrating personnel from 16 departments and agencies (MI5, MI6, GCHQ, police, Ministry of Defence, among others) under a single authority. Its establishment broke institutional barriers, allowed for the centralization of analysis, and counteracted the existing dispersion in counter-terrorism information (Harbisher, 2015).

United States (2004a)

One of the responses to the September 11 attacks was the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA), which profoundly reorganized the intelligence community. Its main measures included the creation of the position of Director of National Intelligence (DNI), a central authority tasked with coordinating and integrating the 16 agencies that comprise the U.S. intelligence community (Durbin, 2017).

Spain (2004)

Following the Madrid attacks of March 2004, the National Counter-Terrorism Coordination Center (CNCA) was created, which later evolved into the Center for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organized Crime (CITCO). This body integrated security forces and intelligence services with the objective of sharing information on terrorism and organized crime, breaking the traditional separation between civilian intelligence—embodied in the National Intelligence Center (CNI)—and the information units of the Police and the Civil Guard (Díaz-Fernández, 2024).

Belgium (2006)

The reforms of the Belgian intelligence community responded to growing pressure to improve the effectiveness, coordination, and transparency of the services. Traditionally fragmented

between a civilian agency (VS/ Sûreté de l'État) and a military one (ADIV), the system faced various scandals, operational errors, and the need to respond to the terrorist threat. In 2006, the creation of the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAM/CODA) was promoted, an entity tasked with integrating information from intelligence services and other government agencies. This new actor represented an attempt to centralize analysis without completely altering the dual VS-ADIV structure, allowing both agencies to remain specialized in their respective functions—civilian and military—while CODA acted as a multi-source strategic analysis center (Vanhorenbeeck, 2006).

Italy (2007)

At the beginning of the 2000s, the war on terror and technological changes prompted a review of the Italian intelligence system. This process accelerated after the scandal involving the kidnapping of Egyptian cleric Abu Omar in Milan by the CIA, allegedly with the collaboration of SISMI agents, which highlighted deficiencies in oversight and coordination. Law 124/2007 reorganized the intelligence community. It replaced SISMI and SISDE with two new agencies: the Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna (AISE), responsible for foreign intelligence, and the Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna (AISI), responsible for domestic intelligence. Likewise, the CESIS, created in 1977, was abolished, and a more robust central body was established under the prime minister's authority: the Department of Information for Security (DIS), tasked with directing the intelligence system as a whole and with direct authority over the agencies. The result of the 2007 reform was a more centralized knowledge system in which, while functional division between external and internal intelligence is maintained, the prime minister, through the DIS, becomes the single point of intelligence convergence, allowing for better coordination and interagency analysis (Minniti & Pili, 2020).

France (2008)

Reforms undertaken in France sought greater centralization and institutional coordination. These reforms, as a direct response to international terrorism threats, were consolidated with the creation in 2008 of the Conseil national du renseignement (CNR) and the position of Coordonnateur national du renseignement, transferring political responsibility from the prime minister to the President of the Republic. This restructuring represented a break with the previous model of the Inter-ministerial Intelligence Committee, which had failed to ensure effective coordination since its creation in 1959. The goal of that system had been to overcome structural fragmentation derived from the dependency of different intelligence services on various ministries and authorities, which hindered their collaboration. With the establishment of the CNR, progress was made toward an intelligence community logic without modifying the agencies' functional specialization, but reinforcing centralized coordination mechanisms (Chopin, 2017; Hayez & Regnault de Maulmin, 2015; Segell, 2009).

New Zealand (2009)

This country carried out a significant reform of its intelligence community oriented toward improving inter-agency coordination and strengthening its institutional structure under a functional centralization model, without eliminating the specialization of agencies such as the NAB (national security and external intelligence), the GCSB (signals intelligence), and the NZSIS (internal intelligence). This reform originated in the Murdoch Report (2009), which recommended reinforcing the system's coherence and coordination. To this end, the Intelligence Coordination Group (ICG) was created within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), tasked with directly advising the prime minister, coordinating priorities, and preparing assessments for all intelligence agencies. Parallelly, several agencies were consolidated into a single headquarters, favoring physical proximity as a mechanism to increase informal and operational collaboration. This new model, defined as "one community, many agencies" (Whibley, 2014), also included the creation of fused intelligence products—reports prepared by multiple agencies based on a common analytical narrative (Gillespie & Breen, 2021).

United Kingdom (2010)

In the area of strategic coordination, the United Kingdom established a National Security Council (NSC) for the first time in 2010, chaired by the prime minister, with the objective of integrating security and intelligence policies from relevant departments at the highest level. The NSC regularly brings together the heads of intelligence services along with key ministers—Defense, Home Office, Foreign Office, among others—ensuring a shared vision and centralized direction in national security matters. This addressed the previous fragmentation of decision-making, which was dispersed across different committees. Additionally, the UK has reinforced the controlled distribution of intelligence toward local actors; for example, the British police have Regional Counter-Terrorism Units linked to MI5, which receive intelligence to act against threats in their respective jurisdictions (Lonsdale, 2012).

India (2010)

Following the Mumbai attacks of 2008, India developed the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) project with the aim of breaking the existing functional silos among its multiple agencies. NATGRID is a platform that connects 21 databases from different security agencies—police, internal intelligence, customs, banks, among others—into a unified repository accessible continuously to authorized analysts. Conceived as a response to the lack of coordination that allowed relevant information about terrorists to go unnoticed, NATGRID intends for disparate data—travel, communications, and finances—to converge for integrated analysis and threat pattern detection. After multiple delays, the system was approved in 2010; however, it is currently still in an incipient phase, having overcome numerous legal

and inter-sectoral cooperation problems. This is an example of technological centralization of knowledge that facilitates the controlled distribution of intelligence among Indian agencies (Shaffer, 2018).

Argentina (2011-2021)

Between 2011 and 2021, reforms of criminal intelligence in Argentina reflected a persistent tension between political control and operational effectiveness, seeking to prioritize the political centralization axis without resulting in complete operational or structural centralization. Attempts were made to strengthen the political leadership of criminal intelligence under the Ministry of Security through the creation of SICRI and CICRE. Nevertheless, in practice, functional fragmentation and decentralization across multiple federal and provincial forces persisted. Democratic control and intelligence legitimacy were prioritized following successive illegal espionage scandals, displacing concerns about the preventive effectiveness of criminal intelligence (Estévez, 2020; Poczynok, 2023; Sain, 2016).

Japan (2013)

In the case of Japan, recent reforms, especially since 2008, reflect a gradual but sustained process of centralization and functional integration. One of the main drivers of these reforms has been the need to overcome a bureaucratic culture characterized by compartmentalization and a lack of coordination among agencies, in an increasingly complex geopolitical context marked by the North Korean nuclear threat, Chinese expansion, and the strategic retrenchment of the United States. Faced with these pressures, the Japanese government consolidated the role of the Director of Cabinet Intelligence (DCI) and the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office (CIRO) as central coordinating bodies, capable of articulating the needs of the political sphere with those of the intelligence community. The mechanisms employed included 1) the formalization of the DCI as the system's main coordinator and 2) the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) and its secretariat (National Security Secretariat, NSS) in 2013, which serve as a high-level political interface. Although Japan still lacks a specialized HUMINT agency and maintains multitasking structures, it has achieved improvements in vertical and horizontal coordination thanks to the leadership of the DCI (Kobayashi, 2023; Samuels, 2019).

Indonesia (2020)

In July 2020, President Joko Widodo signed a presidential decree that eliminated the coordinating function of the Ministry of Political, Legal, and Security Affairs over the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), granting the president direct and exclusive control over it. This decision generated concern, as it evoked times of abuse of power during the Soeharto presidency (1965-1998). The government defended the measure, alleging that the president requires direct access to intelligence information.

United States (2004b)

Another result of the IRTPA of 2004 was the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) as a multi-agency node for joint intelligence analysis on terrorism, both domestic and international. The NCTC brought together analysts from various agencies under a single structure to prepare unified threat assessments (Durbin, 2017)

Australia (2024)

In 2024, Australia announced a 2-billion-Australian-dollar deal with Amazon Web Services (AWS) to move highly sensitive intelligence data to the cloud. The objective has been to improve interoperability and ensure greater technological resilience. Complementarily, work is being done on the use of artificial intelligence for analyzing such data. This initiative will allow the ten Australian intelligence agencies to improve threat detection (Hammond-Errey, 2024).

Axis II. Specialization vs. multifunction

Italy (1977)

In the 1970s, the Italian Republic was shaken by domestic terrorism and beset by coup attempts and conspiracies involving security services. The military intelligence service (SID) was accused of being behind some of these activities. A parliamentary investigation recommended a restructuring that materialized in Law No. 801 of 1977. This law dissolved SID and established two new agencies: SISMI, for military and external intelligence, and SISDE, for domestic security (Sidoti, 2009).

Australia (1980)

Following the Hope Commission recommendations, Australia promoted greater centralization of political control. However, this centralization coexisted with the proliferation of specialized agencies with their own mandates, generating operational fragmentation and coordination difficulties (Jones, 2010; Walsh, 2021.

France (1982)

Under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, the French foreign intelligence service, the SDECE (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage), enjoyed considerable autonomy, but it became embroiled in scandal when it was linked to the kidnapping of Moroccan dissident Mehdi Ben Barka in Paris in 1965. The arrival of François Mitterrand to power and his distrust of an intelligence apparatus perceived as closely tied to Gaullist and right-wing networks led, in 1982, to a broad reform of the SDECE, which was renamed the DGSE (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure). One of the most significant changes was that the DGSE became part of the Ministry of Defense, which clarified civilian control

and limited its actions in the domestic sphere, as internal security remained the responsibility of another agency, the DST (Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire).

Canadá (1984)

During the Cold War, national security intelligence in Canada was handled by a branch of the national police force: the Security Service of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). In the 1970s, it was discovered that this unit had engaged in illicit activities, including spying on citizens and members of parliament. The McDonald Commission (1977–1981) investigated these abuses amid strong public criticism and recommended removing this intelligence function from the RCMP. As a result, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act of 1984 created the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) as a new civilian, multi-function intelligence agency responsible for national security intelligence (counterespionage, counterterrorism, and other functions), while the RCMP focused exclusively on law enforcement. With this, Canada adopted a model in which a single civilian agency covers the main security intelligence missions (Hensler, 1995; Robinson, 2009).

Poland (1990)

In the case of Poland, the post-communist transition led to a model of institutional centralization under a single agency, the Office for the Protection of the State (UOP), created in 1990 with both civilian intelligence and counterintelligence responsibilities. This concentration of functions generated political tensions, especially among right-wing sectors, as it was perceived as a continuation of the repressive apparatus of the previous regime, due to its direct subordination to the Ministry of the Interior. Despite these criticisms, the reform represented a structural break with the previous communist model, in which intelligence and police shared a single hierarchical chain within the same ministry. Simultaneously, functional specialization was maintained through the creation, in 1991, of the Military Intelligence Service (WSI), under the Ministry of Defense, with specific responsibilities in military intelligence. Thus, Poland opted for a centralized system with a clear separation between civilian and military agencies. This choice corresponded to an institutional logic of concentration that favored the creation of stable structures, although subject to frequent reorganizations, reflecting a regulatory framework still in the process of consolidation (Gruszczak, 2016; Kolaszyński, 2021; Polak & Galij-Skarbińska, 2017).

Germany (1990-1994)

The reunification of Germany in 1990 involved the integration of two intelligence systems of opposing natures: the western system, corresponding to the Federal Republic of Germany, and the eastern system, belonging to the German Democratic Republic. Germany chose not to create a single, unified intelligence agency, maintaining traditional specialization, albeit under a unified state control framework after reunification. The Bundesnachrichtendienst

(BND), West Germany's foreign intelligence service, continued to operate as the primary foreign intelligence agency of the reunified country, while counterintelligence and internal security fell under the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV), which extended its coverage to the entire national territory (Krieger, 2016).

South Africa (1995)

During the apartheid regime, intelligence and security services were geared toward preserving the dominance of the white minority. Agencies such as the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), later renamed the National Intelligence Service (NIS), acted as a secret police force, while military intelligence focused on suppressing anti-apartheid movements. In the context of the transition negotiations, the African National Congress and the interim government agreed on the need for a profound reform of the security sector. As a result, the NIS was dissolved, and in 1995, two new services were created: the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), responsible for domestic intelligence, and the South African Secret Service (SASS), responsible for foreign intelligence. Both agencies were established under civilian authority, specifically the Ministry of Intelligence (Lebakeng, 2023; O'Brien, 2011; Putter, 2024).

United States (2003)

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003 spurred the development of a network of state and local fusion centers, which grew from 9 in 2003 to 78 in 2014. These fusion centers, managed by state and local governments, bring together personnel from various federal agencies—such as the FBI and DHS—with state and municipal police and other entities to receive, analyze, and share real-time threat intelligence. Although they faced significant challenges in their early stages, such as cultural differences between organizations and privacy risks, they have become more effective over time and are now a central component for facilitating information sharing between local and federal authorities (Sheehy, 2014).

United States (2004)

The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA) introduced another key innovation to the US system by creating the Information Sharing Environment (ISE), an institutional and technological platform designed to facilitate the sharing of terrorism information among all relevant entities—federal, state, and local—while ensuring security and respect for civil liberties (Abaas et al., 2014; Coffey, 2015; Jones, 2007; Lewin, 2012).

Germany (2004)

In 2004, Germany took a significant step toward the functional centralization of knowledge with the creation of the Joint Counterterrorism Center (Gemeinsames Terrorismusabwehrzentrum,

GTAZ). This center is not a new agency, but rather an operational platform for interagency cooperation in which more than forty agencies and institutions—including the Federal Intelligence Service (BND), the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), the Federal Police, and the police forces of the Länder—share information and coordinate strategies against Islamist extremism and other terrorist threats. The GTAZ represents an innovative model that respects Germany's decentralized federal structure and maintains the functional specialization of the participating agencies, while creating a central hub for real-time information sharing and joint planning. Thus, Germany did not reorganize its intelligence community but rather centralized the flow of knowledge for specific tasks through a mechanism that promotes a coordinated and multidisciplinary response to complex threats (Krieger, 2016).

France (2008)

France had two main domestic intelligence agencies: the DST (Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire), responsible for counterintelligence and counterterrorism, and the RG (Renseignements Généraux), a police intelligence service focused on subversive activities, social unrest, and organized crime. The post-9/11 context spurred the need for a more streamlined domestic intelligence structure, and in 2008, the DST and the RG were merged into a single agency, the DCRI (Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur), which was later reorganized and renamed the DGSI (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure). The reform aimed to improve the fight against terrorism and avoid overlaps and conflicts between the two services. The DCRI/DGSI centralized all domestic intelligence functions—terrorism monitoring, counterintelligence, surveillance of extremist groups and sociopolitical movements—and was placed under the Ministry of the Interior. It also represented a shift towards a more functional organization, in which threats are addressed by specialized units (counterterrorism, counterintelligence, among others) under a single structure, rather than by separate agencies with different approaches.

United Kingdom (2017-2021)

The creation of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), integrated within the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), was intended to share knowledge about cyber threats with the private sector and the public, establishing a novel model of collaborative public-private intelligence (Willett, 2024). This experience demonstrates that the specialization/multifunction axis can be expanded to include cooperation with external actors. The British trend reflects a balance between leveraging private innovation—such as cloud computing or big data analytics—and mitigating associated risks through security assessments and potentially new protocols, such as contractual limitations and third-party audits (Lonsdale, 2012).

Discussion. Creation of the explanatory axes for the organization of intelligence structures

The comparison between the case studies and the five initial dynamics identified in the scientific literature led to their regrouping into two main dynamics of change and adaptation. These develop along two axes: 1) centralization vs. decentralization and 2) specialization vs. multifunctionality. The historical and comparative review confirms and, at the same time, refines this theoretical framework regarding the organizational dynamics of intelligence services and communities on a global scale.

The empirical evidence shows a constant pendulum swing between centralization and decentralization, as well as between specialization and multifunctionality. This swing depends on the starting point: if, for example, the failure is considered to stem from excessive decentralization, the response tends to be the recentralization of the system, and vice versa. However, this does not imply that these dynamics persist for long periods or that the pendulum always swings the full range between the extremes.

It is also worth emphasizing that these dynamics, while driving improvement and adaptation, also generate negative externalities that can necessitate further reforms, either because the system reaches a point of rigidity or because the environment compels its modification. Ultimately, there is no single model, but rather a constant evolution toward hybrid configurations that combine centralized control, functional specialization, and inter-institutional cooperation.

Centralization vs. decentralization axis

This axis unfolds between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the centralization of the intelligence function in a single agency responsible for all the functions inherent to intelligence services; on the other, a more decentralized model, in which several agencies with specific functions coexist. However, a second type of centralization-decentralization can also be identified, one that is no longer operational but rather political-strategic. In this case, the central function consists of aligning, merging, or coordinating the work of several agencies. This task may fall to a coordinating body or to a central agency that, in addition to producing intelligence, assumes strategic leadership responsibilities. This latter option is compatible with a decentralization of intelligence production among several agencies, especially in large systems, as is the case in the United States with the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) since 2004, or in Japan after the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013.

The clearest manifestation of this approach can be seen in the reforms adopted after the crisis caused by the attack on Pearl Harbor, which highlighted the lack of coordination among the agencies involved in intelligence production. The result of that reflection, coupled with the challenges to come in the confrontation with the Soviet Union during the Cold War,

was the creation of the model established by the National Security Act of 1947, configured around multiple agencies coordinated within a framework that would later be known as the "intelligence community," a paradigmatic case of political centralization in the United States. Sherman Kent himself (1949) had already identified this dilemma when he asked whether "central intelligence should be a large operational organization or, on the contrary, a coordinating and managing organization" (p. 110). However, far from Pearl Harbor being the origin of this reflection, the idea of "lack of coordination as the basis of major events" had already been present in previous decades (Pettee, 1946).

Regarding the other end of the spectrum, decentralization, this can manifest itself in agencies focused on specific regions or themes, which complicates coordination and can increase rivalries and inter-organizational competition (Ransom, 1980; Zegart, 1999), as historically occurred in Russia after the dissolution of the KGB in 1991 or in India, with the need to create NATGRID after the Mumbai attacks in 2008. This was a common dynamic between 1947 and 1956, as well as one of the most recurrent over the last eight decades. A particular case is that of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, where decentralization allowed for the maintenance of different competing agencies (Matei & Bruneau, 2011; Matei & Halladay, 2018). While not entirely disappearing, the problems associated with decentralization resurfaced in full force five decades later, when the 9/11 report identified "the overclassification and excessive compartmentalization of information among agencies" as one of the main flaws of the U.S. intelligence system (9/11 Commission, 2004, p. 417).

The operational dimension constitutes the most basic expression of this axis. However, it also manifests another type of centralization, of a political-strategic nature, as occurred in Italy in 2007, France in 2008, and Indonesia in 2020. The debate on the existence and scope of strong central leadership within the community—in terms of strategy, policies, and resources—combined with the continued legal delegation to agencies of operational control over their activities, has been a constant (Omand, 2010). The challenge, therefore, lies in reaping the benefits of both dynamics (Coulthart et al., 2019). This tension has sometimes resulted in organizational mergers or the creation of political coordination bodies, such as the Department of Homeland Security in the United States, which recalls the 1947 logic of recentralizing the intelligence community, although in this case with a particular emphasis on counterterrorism (Carter & Carter, 2009).

Within the centralization vs. decentralization framework, the 2001 attacks and the failure to assess weapons of mass destruction in 2003 gave rise to a new variant situated toward the decentralization extreme: the centralization of knowledge while agencies remain decentralized. Examples of this include the Information Sharing Environment in the United States and NATGRID in India. Although this model had been long desired, its viability depended on the existence of extensive capabilities in information and communication technologies, as well as technological standards capable of generating trust among agencies in these new communication networks and, by extension, in the information contributed by other institu-

tions to shared repositories (Lewandowski et al., 2017; Monahan & Palmer, 2009; Taylor & Russell, 2012).

Concrete examples of this dynamic include the Information Sharing Environment (ISE), created in 2004 to foster intelligence sharing among agencies through a "trusted information network," and Intellipedia, launched in 2005 as an interagency collaborative wiki (Hammond, 2007; Petrelli, 2022), which had its distant antecedent in Intelink (1994). These initiatives are joined by GitHub, the Homeland Security Data Network (HSDN), NATGRID, and the New York Situational Awareness Program (NYSAP), which have emerged and complemented one another. All of them represent a shift beyond the centralization vs. decentralization dichotomy of organizational structures, by moving the focus toward the management and location of information. This change is crucial, as agencies are no longer defined solely by the accumulation of data, but by their ability to manage and channel it to users in contexts where immediacy is essential (Omand, 2012, p. 292). Thus, while structures remain decentralized, knowledge can be shared through interconnections as if it were centralized.

One variant of this type of decentralization is the outsourcing of intelligence functions that, until two decades ago, were considered an essential part of any intelligence agency or system, to private actors external to state agencies. These outsourcing processes (Storm, 2018; Van Puyvelde, 2019) originated in the need to recover the know-how lost after the partial dismantling of some agencies or the loss of human resources as a consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, a need that the September 11 attacks forced to be reactivated rapidly.

Although this dynamic began to be observed before the 2001 attacks, it intensified afterward, albeit unevenly, since the processes of human capital loss were neither homogeneous nor widespread across all intelligence services. From the outset, the central debate focused on discerning which functions could be outsourced, and which should necessarily remain part of the core functions of intelligence agencies (Jeffreys-Jones, 2024; Lahneman, 2007). However, the distinction between these two categories, as well as the assessment of their advantages and disadvantages, has been a subject of controversy. While outsourcing offers greater flexibility and adaptability, specific incidents—such as the leaks by contractor Snowden—have raised serious concerns regarding cost control, oversight, the enforcement of sanctions for non-compliance, and the impact on citizens' rights and freedoms.

Specialization vs. multi-function axis

This axis unfolds between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the specialization of agencies in specific functions. Its purest manifestation was the classic existence of separate agencies: one for foreign intelligence, another for domestic intelligence, and another for signals intelligence, as occurred primarily between 1970 and 1989, for example, in Italy with the SISMI/SISDE duo or in South Africa with SASS/NIA. In fact, an examination of the available organizational charts of intelligence services from those years shows how the agencies

were structured into divisions and units organized according to regional areas of interest to each country. Thus, while this dynamic may have an internal structural dimension reflected in organizational changes, in most cases what is observed, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is the merging of agencies responsible for foreign and domestic intelligence. This trend, moreover, is not new in the field of intelligence. As early as 1946, Pettee warned that "the tendency of intelligence organizations is to carry out reorganizations at intervals of one, two, or three years, almost always taking the form of a change from 'regional' to 'functional', and then starting all over again" (Pettee, 1946, p. 72; own translation).

At the end of the Cold War, the intelligence community essentially operated under an industrial intelligence production model, in which linear processes governed both collection and analysis (Omand, 2010, p. 291), and in which the relationships between actors conformed to the classic firm-supplier logic described by Porter [1980] (2010). This model was useful when the intelligence community was organized around a specific threat—the Soviet Union—and a primary consumer —the president— (Treverton, 2003, p. 119), or against a specific target such as internal dissent, which also had a clearly defined consumer, the regime elite (Bruneau & Boraz, 2011). But as the 1993 National Performance Review, commissioned by Vice President Al Gore, pointed out, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the intelligence community continued working to combat a threat that was no longer a priority for the presidency.

The diagnosis, therefore, was that the hierarchical, linear, and isolated model had become obsolete and was incapable of anticipating changes and new needs (Berkowitz & Goodman, 2000, p. 63). Consequently, "the intelligence community needs a more flexible system that can be built upon expert knowledge and information, wherever it may be located, whenever the need arises, and that can maintain multiple channels of communication" (Berkowitz & Goodman, 2000, p. 63). Thus began the exploration of a new dynamic consisting of the creation of specialized "centers" to support priority missions in the post-Cold War era; However, in a world still prior to September 11, many authors considered that this theme-oriented organization would have a limited lifespan and that, "when the next crisis […] erupted, there would be a return to the geographical model as the organizational model" (Berkowitz & Goodman, 2000, p. 33; own translation).

The 9/11 report contains severe criticisms of the fragmentation of the intelligence community, and, in a sense of déjà vu, proposals for centralization and specialization, already tested in the past, resurfaced after the attacks (Hammond, 2007). The search for a new model of intelligence governance can be traced back to 2001 (Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006), and the global impact of the attacks prompted numerous countries to move in that direction.

The first dynamic stems from the premise that organizations only excel in one specific function. This leads to the creation of specialized agencies to address specific threats, such as proliferation or serious crime (Bureš, 2016), an example of which is the NCSC in the United Kingdom since 2017. The 2001 attacks highlighted the limitations of agencies designed "for all types of threats" or, more precisely, "for most threats."

The second specialization model involves creating specialized centers that keep agencies separate, without merging them or concentrating all functions in a single entity. In this context, structures such as fusion centers emerge—physical spaces where two or more agencies collaborate, collecting and analyzing information from different sources to generate superior intelligence products (Chermak et al., 2013; Gruszczak, 2022; Lewandowski et al., 2017). Examples of this dynamic include the JTAC in the United Kingdom and the GTAZ in Germany. Although this process intensified after 2001, it was not entirely new: as early as the 1990s, the traditional bureaucratic model had shown its limitations, and task forces and ad hoc centers were used to directly link intelligence producers and consumers (Berkowitz & Goodman, 2000, pp. 63–77). The fundamental difference today lies in technology, understood as a network of networks that allows for the rapid connection of diverse homeland security organizations and facilitates the exchange of critical information. Its effectiveness is based on the immediacy with which it links those close to the information with decision-makers (Pfeifer, 2012, p. 3). Instead of reorganizing entire agencies, the response has been to create specialized collaboration platforms that, while maintaining agency autonomy, allow for information sharing.

Taken together, these two axes—centralization vs. decentralization and specialization vs. multifunctionality—along with the five internal dynamics they generate, highlight the pendulum-like nature of intelligence organization. Understanding these dynamics, as well as their contextual factors, advantages, and externalities, is essential for designing more effective and balanced future models that also incorporate mechanisms for democratic control and adaptive inter-institutional cooperation.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of 31 national cases has shown that intelligence service reforms follow a recurring pattern of oscillation between centralization and decentralization, as well as between specialization and multifunctionality. These dynamics, far from being linear, respond to a pendulum swing conditioned by security crises, political changes, and technological advances. The main finding is that there is no single model for intelligence organization, but rather a constant adaptation toward hybrid configurations that combine centralized control, functional specialization, and inter-institutional cooperation.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this article offers an explanatory framework that reorganizes the five dynamics identified in the literature around two main axes, allowing for a better understanding of organizational change processes in intelligence from a comparative perspective and from the standpoint of organizational theory. This framework helps to address the lack of typologies in intelligence studies and provides a conceptual basis for future research.

The practical implications of this analysis are equally relevant. The pendulum-like nature of reforms suggests that policymakers must be aware of the costs associated with continuous structural changes and the negative externalities these can generate, ranging from the loss of accumulated capabilities to the emergence of new coordination problems. Likewise, the findings point to the need to design resilient intelligence communities capable of balancing operational efficiency, democratic control, and adaptive flexibility.

Limitations and future lines of research

The article presents some limitations that should be noted. The intentional selection of case studies, while useful for identifying recurring patterns, does not allow for comprehensive generalization to all national contexts. Likewise, the reliance on secondary sources and widely known reports limits the exploration of less visible dimensions of the reforms. Nevertheless, these limitations open opportunities for future research that incorporates broader comparative methods and deeper empirical analysis.

In this regard, incorporating an oversight and accountability dimension is particularly relevant. Many of the reforms examined have not been mere organizational restructurings, but rather transformations in intelligence governance. Including a variable that measures the degree of autonomy from external oversight—parliamentary, judicial, or executive—would allow for differentiation between highly centralized but unchecked services, such as the CIA in the 1950s, and others that are equally centralized but subject to robust control mechanisms, such as the Spanish reform of 2002. Similarly, it would be pertinent to explore a framework that assesses structural cooperation and the existence of joint centers, although this would require deeper access to information from various services.

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