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INTEGRATED INTELLIGENCE SERVICES



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dutch newspaper 'De Volkskrant' published a report about the assessment failures of the AIVD (Dutch integrated intelligence service) regarding the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.



The report is outstanding because it is unusual for media to be able to gather information about failures that happened inside the intelligence agencies.

It might indicate that morale within the ranks of the AIVD may not be in perfect shape, because some of the sources are members of the service.

The basis for the assessment mistake lies on the fact that the **AIVD relied heavily on just one source** who was regarded as highly competent and great access.

Despite the signals and the warnings provided by the CIA and SIS (MI6), Dutch AIVD preferred to listen to its most liked source and the choir of European intelligence agencies disregarding other issues which were at everybody's sight.

AIVD integers domestic and foreign intelligence efforts and it may have played against its assessment capabilities, especially because **SIGINT is attached to the needs and requirements of general intelligence.**

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 The source.

The source of the AIVD has not been disclosed, of course. Although for the sake of security it should be desirable that De Volkskrant knows that the source is dead or secured in a foreign country.

According to the available information the source should be someone working at the Presidential Administration, the Armed Forces or the security apparatus. AIVD assumed that the source had top level access. And according to the information, the source had already shown those capabilities. However, **we cannot tell if the access was limited to some specific areas of the government.**

Civil servants, even those well positioned, have not access to every matter being discussed, promoted or

left aside in the administration. An official may have information of the banking system, but it is unlikely he has the same control on what is going on with the Navy deployment in the Arctic or the Black Sea.

The source had always conveyed the message that **Russia had not the intention of starting a war in Ukraine.**

2.2 Signs in ZAPAD preparations.

There were **signs which were overlooked because of a biased mindset** regarding the overall situation. Russia had already invaded two areas in Georgia in 2008. Later in 2014, Russia continued taking Crimea and Donbas. In the meantime, Russia has been securing the *de facto* 'annexation' of Belarus.

Plans to invade Ukraine were regarded as unreasonable for a senseful leader such as Putin was taken for in the West.

Russia organizes every year the military exercises ZAPAD. On this occasion, there were some signs that were overlooked:

- **Unusually large quantities of munitions and supplies** being transported, far exceeding what would be typical for a standard military exercise.
- The movement of **field hospitals and medical units to the border area,** which is not common for regular drills and indicated preparations for potential casualties. **Blood units were transported in remarkable amount** which should have raised some question marks.
- The deployment of fuel trucks and logistical support vehicles in significant numbers, suggesting **readiness for sustained operations rather than a temporary exercise.**
- The **pre-positioning of bridging equipment and engineering units,** which are essential for crossing rivers and other obstacles during an actual offensive, not just for training purposes.
- The establishment of extensive supply lines and stockpiling of food, fuel, and other essentials close to the Ukrainian border, pointing to **preparations for a prolonged conflict.**

These logistical anomalies were key indicators that the Russian military buildup was not routine and should have raised greater alarm among Western intelligence services, AIVD included.

3. CHALLENGES IN COOPERATION

Several challenges associated with trust and information sharing among Western intelligence services must be highlighted:

- **Reluctance to share sensitive information:** Intelligence agencies are often hesitant to share their most sensitive sources and methods, fearing that such information could be compromised or misused by partners.
- **Varying levels of trust:** Trust between agencies is not uniform; some countries are more willing to share intelligence than others, leading to gaps in collective understanding.
- **Concerns over leaks:** There is a persistent fear that shared intelligence could be leaked, either intentionally or unintentionally, which could jeopardize ongoing operations or diplomatic relations.
- **Differences in analysis and interpretation:** Agencies may interpret the same intelligence differently, leading to disagreements or scepticism about the validity of shared assessments.
- **Political and strategic interests:** National interests and political considerations can influence how much and what type of information is shared, sometimes prioritizing national advantage over collective security.
- **Legal and bureaucratic barriers:** Differences in legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures can slow down or complicate the process of sharing intelligence across borders.

These challenges collectively **hinder the effectiveness of coordinated responses to security threats**, as seen in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

3.1 SIGINT restrained by general intelligence

AIVD SIGINT capabilities are embedded in the service. It means that **SIGINT goals are shaped by the general intelligence targets.**

It creates a working environment where SIGINT officers are not used to get really involved in the intelligence development of the investigations. It is not like in the NSA or GCHQ where there are experts in every topic because they have their own informative goals on different environments which exceed the technical knowledge of satellites, communications, AI, quantum mechanics or the internet.

The SIGINT case officer turns his head to the general intelligence officers and asks them how the team can help. In a way, **in integrated intelligence services SIGINT is reactive.**

In integrated intelligence services, from time to time, an assessment on the information disseminated is carried out. It shows that **60% of the conveyed information to authorities is originated by HUMINT and it spends 40% of the budget.** So, SIGINT is regarded as expensive and less efficient but, at the same time, something you cannot live without, especially in the AI era.

Historically, SIGINT has been underestimated because to make it efficient used to require HUMINT in the first place. For example, to decipher the Enigma machine, it required human sources who reported about the existence of the machine, human sources who got documents about the machines and the machine itself, and then the purely technical development carried out at Bletchley Park.

This is why SIGINT is generally embedded in another service. In Germany the BND controls SIGINT and in France it is the DGSE[1].

However, once SIGINT counts on the basic information to act independently it offers a landscape of data which is not subject to interpretation.

In the case of Ukraine, satellite imagery, the internet (social networks, cyber operations) or communication interception **offered a worrying picture which opposed the only high-level source** the AIVD counted on.

3.2 The human factor.

Intelligence services are **prone to make mistakes in times when changes are looming.** Intelligence failed

[1] Both are the foreign intelligence agencies in their respective countries.

to predict the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour or the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the USSR. Arab Springs were also overlooked, as well as the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, to name a few.

These days are definitely changing times which will last years before anyone can see clearly the next stable step.

Autocracy versus democracy will deliver a new system but who knows the shape of the new order. In it, AI will play a role.

Intelligence services will also have to adapt. After 11/9 cooperation among national services was increased. At the time, integrated services believed they were free of that problem as national cooperation could not be greater.

After 25 years, countries with several services have promoted the **interchange of personnel among agencies.** They have been able to lower the walls of mistrust and members of the services know they can work in the other agencies. They have learnt the soul that lives at the heart of each agency, increasing the understanding of each one, what motivates them, what matters to them, what is pivotal for the others and what they seek. They have also learnt the barriers and limitations each one must deal with. It all contributes to a better cooperation, increases empathy and animate a virtual cycle in favour of better intelligence.

In integrated services internal dynamics behave differently.

In these services there is always **a predominant soul which drives the activity of the agency.** It always goes in detriment of the other activities.

SIGINT is usually used as a supporting activity to general intelligence. It frustrates the SIGINT departments because they interact with their counterparts at the NSA or GCHQ who act independently of the CIA, SIS, FBI or MI5. They can be proactive, they are actually required to be proactive, while integrated-services-SIGINT officers are not.

Best results have come from intelligence of countries with differentiated agencies working as close as possible. In order to produce the best intelligence, **the more independent voices are heard, the better.**

4. CONCLUSIONS

Dutch intelligence had a biased understanding of the situation at the Kremlin and **overlooked signs coming from it own gathered information and from foreign intelligence agencies.** It relied on just one source to disregard conclusions which were not desirable and which might be against the belief of its own government.

Disseminating intelligence based on just one source is increasingly done. However, intelligence agencies which do so, insist on **specifying that those reports rely on just one source.** Although the source is highly reliable the authorities are advised about that particularity.

This is important because a valuable asset can be used and that information can be checked in higher institutions (fusion cells, government intelligence community, national security advisors and so on) and **confronted with the information shared by other agencies.**

Intelligence agencies should not forget that even if they are integrated services, there are many **other institutions in the administration which can share important information and shift conclusions**, depending on the topic of interest. Diplomats, law enforcement, IRS and others can contribute greatly.

The lessons learned from the Dutch intelligence failures regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, include:

- The importance of **improving trust and information sharing** among Western intelligence agencies to ensure timely and coordinated responses.
- The need to **challenge existing assumptions and encourage critical analysis** within intelligence agencies to avoid underestimating adversaries.
- **Investing in specialized expertise**, particularly regarding adversaries' military doctrines and hybrid warfare tactics, to enhance understanding and preparedness.
- Addressing political and diplomatic scepticism by **establishing clear protocols for reconciling differing intelligence assessments** and effectively communicating findings to policymakers.
- Adapting intelligence frameworks to counter hybrid threats, such as cyber operations and influence campaigns, by **integrating cyber intelligence and counter-influence measures.**

- Fostering a learning culture within intelligence agencies, including **conducting after-action reviews and institutionalizing lessons learned** to prevent similar failures in the future. This particular topic can be applied to Spain regarding the invasion of Ceuta in July 2026. There was a similar event in May 2021 which should have prompted measures to avoid the event in 2026.

All is aimed at strengthening international security cooperation and improving the effectiveness of intelligence operations in the face of complex and evolving threats. **Black swans can happen once, but intelligence agencies cannot afford to let them be repeated over and over again.**

5. COMMENTS ON THE WAY FORWARD

What happened in Ukraine, related to Western intelligence agencies, shows differences regarding the intelligence efforts carried out by intelligence services.

During the Cold War, gathering information from behind the iron curtain was extremely difficult. It forced intelligence agencies to focus on the analysis of the limited information they were able to get which, adding to its scarcity, was hard to verify.

Being a citizen from behind the iron curtain offered limited options for the assets of the Soviet Union to get access to information. So, **they developed all the illegal programmes, which are still active today**, although with some changes.

But all that has changed. **Internet, AI and globalization have given access to data and people in many different ways. The volume of data is overwhelming intelligence agencies.** It is key for a case officer to know exactly what he pursues. Therefore, intelligence agencies must define their intelligence targets which, in turn, have to meet the government's needs.

Case officers will perform better if that chain of command works and conveys clear messages. Sooner rather than later, **AI tools are expected to provide support to case officers and analysts**, helping them process large amounts of data and identify hidden patterns. These tools are also expected to help assess information for verification or exclusion — or, at least, rate its reliability— and **reduce noise.**

The Intelligence Community in each country will always need data. These data can be gathered through any means, including HUMINT, SIGINT or special operations. **Without data, analysts and their powerful AI tools will be blind**, as the West was during the Cold War and, recently, as continental

European intelligence agencies were regarding Russia's plan in Ukraine.

AI will support and increase the capabilities of analysts whose main effort should be focused on discovering the informative gaps and directing the information-gathering teams to cover them. But **the effort of the intelligence community should be the information-gathering side of the business.**

HUMINT cannot be replaced by other means. It usually precedes SIGINT collection and is vital for verifying information gathered by other methods.

What emerges is that obtaining information, the best achievable in any environment, should be the centre of the activity of any intelligence agency.

In the case of Ukraine, **the CIA and SIS had access to information at every level, from the Kremlin down to military units.** They knew not only about Russia's invasion plans, but also about the quantities of blood supplies and field hospitals being sent to the exercise, and when aircraft were being fuelled. The key was access to data at every level and in detail.

Conversely, **the AIVD lacked sufficient data and based its assessment on inaccurate information, with limited insight into developments on what would become the battlefield,** particularly the Russian troops deployed for the ZAPAD exercise. **The less information analysts have, the more their assessments are shaped by their own beliefs.** It usually works well but it doesn't work to devise a black swan approaching.

Black swans are the bottlenecks of intelligence services. Therefore, their efforts should address them. Information gathering is the only and most important activity to tackle them. **Services promoting it are already excelling within the world intelligence community.**

At the same time, some intelligence services are keen to use intelligence to conduct operations (actionable intelligence), rather than confining themselves to providing assessments that inform decision-making. In this comparison, the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Iran, Ukraine and Russia form the leading group. China, France, Poland and Turkey rank below them in their operational use of intelligence, while Saudi Arabia may also begin to move in this direction.

Actionable intelligence helps define the goals for the intelligence agency and the teams in each area of interest. Therefore, it is another characteristic that helps reduce

noise and **define the scope and duration of intelligence efforts.**

5.1 Conclusions on the way forward.

In order to be efficient intelligence services in the times ahead, **agencies should increase the information gathering while applying AI tools to reduce analysis teams** at the HQ.

Actionable intelligence should be the final goal, even though the incumbent government is not in favour of carrying out operations based on intelligence to benefit the country. **Actionable intelligence has to do with a war mindset, but intelligence agencies should live and work with that mentality.**

The mere fact of working to get actionable intelligence is beneficial for the agency and the country because **it helps define targets, increase the quality of the information required and it sets higher standards.**

Setting up this framework takes time, requires taking risks and involves making mistakes. No agency can skip the learning curve needed to establish the new normal, but it will be **more painful if change is forced by circumstances rather than driven from within.**

SOURCE

https://www.volkskrant.nl/kijkverder/v/2026/russia-ukraine-intelligence-netherlands-investigation~v3114923/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F