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The problem of intelligence in International Relations theory

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Abstract

States spy. Yet International Relations (IR) theory has no systematic account of intelligence. I make three arguments. First, realist IR theories are too narrow to theorize intelligence as the complex social practice it is. Realism renders intelligence invisible or reduces it to a single instrumental *raison d'état* logic. Second, the English School's societal approach opens the way for theorizing intelligence as instrument of normative practice. Extending Adam Watson's *raison de système* to intelligence, grounded in the intelligence–diplomacy relationship and corroborated by an emerging *lex specialis*, establishes that intelligence helps constitute international society rather than merely operating within it. Third, the societal approach does not exhaust the subject. *Raison d'humanité* names a third logic – intelligence in the service of justice – and critical approaches deepen the account by asking whose survival, whose order, and whose humanity the framework serves. The three logics are in permanent tension and tend toward a rough hierarchy, reflecting political choice rather than structural necessity. This analysis raises a question for future research: whether intelligence qualifies as a primary institution of international society – a practice whose place is not at the margins of world politics but at its center. Where there are spies, there is society.

Keywords: English School; espionage; International Relations theory; international society; primary institutions

Introduction

States spy – and they do not do so in a political, legal, or normative vacuum.[1] That makes the marginality of the practice of intelligence in contemporary International Relations (IR) theory even more striking.[2]

[1]Erskine 2004; Chesterman 2006; Bitten 2014; Gill and Phythian 2018; Omand and Phythian 2018; Gaspard and Pili 2022; Sims 2022; de Werd et al. 2024; Fabre 2024; Buchan and Navarrete 2025; Lubin and Buchan 2025; Goldman 2026; Lubin 2026; Willmetts and Hijzen 2026.

[2]Schuett and Williams 2024, 224–5. Notable exceptions and partial engagements are Wight 1977; Neumann 2003; Erskine 2004; Sims 2022; Schuett and Williams 2024. Even the late Robert Jervis (1976;

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In the *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes observes that 'kings, and persons of sovereign authority … are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators … and continual spies upon their neighbours, which is a posture of war.'[3] In *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, Hugo Grotius declares that 'Spies, whose sending is beyond doubt permitted by the law of nations – such as the spies whom Moses sent out, or Joshua himself – if caught are usually treated most severely.'[4] In *Perpetual Peace*, however, Immanuel Kant condemned 'the employment of spies' as 'being intrinsically despicable.'[5] Stealing secrets from one another is as old and controversial as political life – from ancient China and India to the unprecedented disclosure of Western intelligence assessments in the lead-up to Russia's launch of full-scale war against Ukraine, and to ongoing covert operations and state-sponsored assassinations across the globe.[6] Yet IR theory has had remarkably little to say about it, routinely treating spying or espionage as little more than just another Hobbesian practice of *raison d'état*.

The neglect matters because intelligence is a near-universal practice in world politics and poses, like the practice of diplomacy and war, fundamental questions for its theorization in IR at the intersection of politics, law, and philosophy. How states deal with uncertainty, can sustain deterrence, conduct diplomacy, go to war, prosecute war crimes, enforce global norms, and pursue accountability and justice for atrocity all depend – in ways that cannot be wished away and remain often unseen – on bilateral and multilateral flows of secret information. The normative controversies that intelligence generates over claims of sovereignty and legitimacy, and a rightful balance between security, liberty, and justice in international society, are among its defining tensions. Half a century ago, in his review of Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* – a key English School (ES) work – Geoffrey Berridge said quite rightly that to matters of spying Bull 'pays hardly any attention at all.'[7] Half a century later, the silence persists, and my argument is that IR theory's silence on intelligence is no longer sustainable.

In this article, I make the case for ES theorization of intelligence. Mapping intelligence across the heuristic Hobbesian (realism), Grotian (rationalism), and Kantian (revolutionism) triad – or, in the language of this article, intelligence as *raison d'état*, *raison de système*, and *raison d'humanité* – shows that spying or espionage is not merely deployed within a purely materialistic international system but that, once opened up and subjected to the possibility of the ES societal approach to world politics, the practice of intelligence helps constitute international society and reproduce it.[8] The core contribution is the extension of Grotian rationalism, specifically of Adam Watson's *raison de système*, to intelligence, grounded in the structural

1979; 2010), an influential IR theorist and a key figure in Intelligence Studies, kept his intelligence work and IR work in separate compartments.

[3]Hobbes 1651 [1996], 85 (ch. 13, para. 12).

[4]Grotius, quoted in Lubin 2026, 3.

[5]Kant 1795 [1991], 97 (First Section, Preliminary Article 6). On Kant's strong objection to espionage, see Espíndola and Rodríguez Ramírez 2025.

[6]Andrew 2018; Zegart 2023; Gioe and Morell 2024; Trenta and Avramov 2025; Field and Trenta 2026.

[7]Bull 1977; Berridge 1980, 91–2.

[8]Wight 1991; also, Buzan 2014, 12–5. I use the triad as a heuristic device. The traditions are ideal types that bleed into one another just as the mapping of intelligence onto *raison d'état*, *raison de système*, and *raison d'humanité* is analytically distinct but empirically entangled.

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relationship between intelligence and diplomacy and corroborated by the emerging *lex specialis* of international law.[9]

The three logics are in permanent tension. *Raison d'état* and *raison de système* collide whenever a state must choose between protecting sources and methods and disclosing intelligence to sustain collective order. *Raison d'état* and *raison d'humanité* collide whenever state secrecy shields perpetrators from accountability. In practice, the three logics tend toward a rough hierarchy. One might say that *raison d'état* is the default logic of intelligence, *raison de système* is its societal counterpart oriented toward rule-governed coexistence, and *raison d'humanité* is its most demanding and least reliably realized horizon. But this hierarchy reflects political choice rather than structural necessity. Whether intelligence serves survival, order, or humanity depends not on any hidden law of nature in IR, but on what states decide to do with the practice. My argument closes with a suggestion that the analysis generates but cannot resolve here: that intelligence is a primary institution of international society – a question this article opens as a research horizon. The sheer depth and diffuseness of intelligence as a practice are not an obstacle to its theorization as a potential primary institution; diplomacy and war are no less diffuse, and what makes them primary institutions is not any alleged uniformity of what they are but the constitutive function they do perform.

The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I establish what I call the realist impasse. Across realism's many variants, it either renders intelligence theoretically invisible or reduces it to a single instrumental dimension. Second, based on realism's failure that points toward a societal approach, I develop that approach as the article's core IR theory contribution. Across three sub-sections, I argue that intelligence operates as a practice of *raison de système*, that it stands in a structural relationship with diplomacy that neither can be fully theorized without the other, and that the emerging *lex specialis* of international law supplies the Grotian corroboration. In a third step, I move beyond ES theorization. I spell out a solidarist notion of intelligence as *raison d humanité*, discuss the challenge of critical approaches, and advance the primary institution suggestion as a research horizon for the field.

A note on scope and context. This article focuses on foreign intelligence – the shadow world of the CIA and MI6 – understood broadly as the organized collection, analysis, and covert use of secret information by states in the conduct of their external relations.[10] Subjecting intelligence to ES theorization neither demonizes nor whitewashes it; exactly because the practice has ranged from committing murder to hunting down murderers, from sustaining international order to subverting it through fabrication, disinformation, and, at times, lies – for better or worse: 'Intelligence is what intelligence does.'[11] My argument that IR theorization must account for the fact that intelligence serves ends beyond state survival does not suggest that

[9]Watson 1992, 14; see also Terradas 2025.

[10]Defining intelligence is difficult because the range of functions vary widely across time, place, and regime type. I broadly follow Stout and Warner 2018: A useful approach is to distinguish between intelligence's core functions (collection, analysis, counterintelligence, covert action) and peripheral functions, which includes everything from classical wartime battlefield intelligence to the Soviet KGB running soccer teams to Israel's use of its intelligence agencies in the fight against COVID-19 (Kahana 2021).

[11]As in Stout and Warner 2018. A most consequential illustration remains the use of manipulated intelligence to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the CIA's post-9/11 Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation program; see Jervis 2010, 123–55; Blakeley and Price 2025.

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intelligence agencies should operate outside their legal mandates and governmental authorization; they must not.[12] I do not address domestic intelligence, the growing private intelligence sector, or the full range of non-Western intelligence traditions, each of which raises important IR theory questions that fall beyond my scope.[13] Recent years have seen a growing interest in intelligence theory and philosophy within Intelligence Studies.[14] What remains absent in the study of world politics is a systematic engagement from within IR theory – and it is that gap, rather than the definitional disputes within Intelligence Studies, that this article addresses. Subjecting intelligence to (societal) IR theorization creates the normative condition for holding the practice to account.

Why realism points beyond itself

Few practices in IR seem more naturally at home within a realist framework, and yet realism – in all its variants – has theorized it least.

This section argues that the paradox is structural. Realism treats intelligence as an ordinary and inevitable feature of political life under anarchy; as one of the many elements of national power through which states pursue survival and security. Taken for granted as a functional expression of power politics, intelligence requires no further theorization and consequently receives none. Across its many variants, realism only deepens this impasse: the more seriously one takes it on its own terms, the clearer it becomes that its core concepts of power, survival, and anarchy cannot account for the normative, institutional, and social dimensions of intelligence in international society.

The argument proceeds in three steps. It first establishes the *raison d'état* reading of intelligence and the paradoxical silence this has produced within the realist tradition itself. It then presses realism across its main variants and draws on recent scholarship on secrecy and intentions in IR to show where each runs out. The conclusion is that realism points beyond itself – toward a societal approach capable of capturing what it cannot.

Intelligence as raison d'état

Definitions of intelligence – however contested[15] – converge on one point: that spying or espionage is a 'business as old as recorded history'[16]; and that this business is firmly tied to the notion of high politics, the world of strategy and war (and its avoidance), to statecraft and its necessities. Sherman Kent, the Yale historian who became a founding figure of the CIA's analytical tradition, conceived intelligence as a disciplined effort to anticipate danger and prevent surprise – as a tool by which

[12]This is not an argument for unduly constraining intelligence work but one grounded in the rule of law as a constitutive principle for democratic governance. Legislatures remain free to expand or contract the legal mandates of their countries' intelligence services (within, of course, the constitutional constraints that the rule of law itself imposes).

[13]Zegart 2007; Davies and Gustafson 2013; Tucker and Robson-Morrow 2025; Wong 2026.

[14]Gill and Phythian 2018; Gaspard and Pili 2022; de Werd et al. 2024; Gill 2025.

[15]Warner 2002; Wheaton and Beerbower 2006; Gill and Phythian 2018; Marrin 2018; Gaspard and Pili 2022; de Werd et al. 2024.

[16]Warner 2002, 1.

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governments could act with foresight rather than reaction.[17] Mark Lowenthal's widely adopted formulation of intelligence as process, product, and institution reproduces the same logic.[18] So does the US Intelligence Community's official definition of intelligence as 'information gathered within or outside the United States that involves threats to the nation, its people, property, or interests.'[19] Amy Zegart is perhaps most revealing: intelligence, she argues, is 'information that gives policymakers an advantage over their adversaries.'[20] Here, the word 'adversaries' is telling. It presupposes a world structured by permanent enmity – a Schmittian universe of friends and foes in which the existence of the adversary is the foundational political condition, not a contingent one. The *raison d'état* logic embedded in the definitional literature carries, in this sense, a specific and contestable political ontology.

The empirical record is equally unambiguous, and the *raison d'état* reading of intelligence has penetrated political culture so deeply that it has become common sense. The Cold War, in Calder Walton's apt description, was an 'epic intelligence war between East and West,' in which both superpowers invested massively in espionage, covert action, and signals intelligence (SIGINT) as existential necessities.[21] Operation RYaN – the joint KGB-GRU effort to detect preparations for a Western nuclear first strike, driven by the trauma of Operation Barbarossa and the doctrine that '1941 shall not be repeated'[22] – epitomized the realist condition of self-help under anarchy.[23] After 9/11, the United States remade its entire intelligence apparatus around a single survival imperative, one that authorized torture, rendition, and the suspension of legal constraint under what amounted to a logic of Schmittian exception.[24] In the Israel–Iran confrontation or shadow war, intelligence functions as realpolitik by other means – assassination, sabotage, and cyber warfare as the means in an existential rivalry prosecuted in the shadows.[25] That this is so requires, apparently, no justification. Former US Vice-President Dick Cheney infamously described post-9/11 intelligence operations as the executive power's 'sort of the dark side,'[26] while Fareed Zakaria captured the prevailing common sense with bluntness: intelligence is 'called the world's second oldest profession for a reason. Everyone does it.'[27] The *raison d'état* reading of intelligence is, in short, empirically robust and politically self-evident.

And yet the theoretical silence within realism is equally striking, and it is here that the paradox bites.

Kenneth Waltz's structural turn located explanatory power at the systemic level, rendering all state-level practices theoretically subordinate.[28] Intelligence became a second-image phenomenon, subsumed under national security and beneath the

[17]Kent 1949.
[18]Lowenthal 2025.
[19]Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) 2025.
[20]Zegart 2022, 79.
[21]Walton 2023.
[22]Fischer 1997, 29.
[23]Selvage 2025.
[24]Ralph 2009; Blakeley and Price 2025.
[25]Ward 2024.
[26]Meet the Press with Tim Russert, 16 September 2001.
[27]Fareed Zakaria GPS, CNN, 19 January 2014.
[28]Waltz 1979.

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threshold of theoretical attention. Because the security dilemma already explains why states compete under anarchy, there appears little analytical reason to theorize the instruments of that competition separately.[29] John Mearsheimer, the self-described offensive realist, has not engaged questions of intelligence or espionage in his otherwise extensive body of scholarship – a silence that is, on reflection, entirely consistent with neorealism's structural logic.[30] The case of Robert Jervis is equally revealing. As Robert Art observed, Jervis 'almost singlehandedly created the special area of IR theory that blended history, international politics, security, and psychology.'[31] Yet his writings on intelligence – most notably his analyses of the Iranian Revolution and Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, but also his foundational work on misperception and its consequences for how states read adversarial intentions – stand somewhat apart from his IR-theoretical work.[32] It is almost as if Jervis, 'the dean of intelligence studies,' were wearing two hats, addressing two distinct audiences simultaneously.[33]

I draw a similar conclusion from the intelligence failures literature. Misperception, strategic surprise, signals in the noise, connecting the dots – all these failures to understand both known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns in politics and IR are not material events explicable at the structural level.[34] States misread adversarial intentions not because of the structure of the balance of power in the international system but because of how secret information collected through covert means and open-source intelligence is interpreted and communicated within bureaucratic and political contexts that structural realism cannot see. Any new IR attempt at theorizing intelligence that cannot account for these failures at the different yet intertwined unit-levels (political, cultural, bureaucratic, psychological) cannot fully account for the deeply social nature of intelligence as a practice.

Classical realism offers no real corrective. Morgenthau naturalized intelligence as an expression of the struggle for power so thoroughly that it became pre-theoretical. His sole sustained engagement with the subject, a 1967 critique of CIA domestic activities, treated espionage as an institutional danger to democratic governance rather than as a problem for IR theory – fearing, quite rightly, that unchecked intelligence agencies were 'how totalitarianism starts.'[35] John Herz, similarly, recalled his wartime service in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) with intellectual fascination (and the occasional frustration and boredom) yet drew no theoretical IR conclusions from it.[36] For both, intelligence was a fact of political life that required no theoretical elaboration.

The theoretical silence within realism, especially in its neorealist formulation, follows necessarily from its core methodological commitments. The impasse is built into realism's foundational assumptions – which is precisely why pressing it across its many variants, as the next subsection does, only deepens rather than resolves it.

[29]Schuett and Williams 2024, 224–25.
[30]Mearsheimer 2001.
[31]Art 2022, 22.
[32]Jervis 1976; Jervis 2010.
[33]Wirtz 2022.
[34]Wohlstetter 1962; Jervis 1976; Betts 1982; Zegart 2007; Jervis 2010; Jones and Pinfold 2025; Kern et al. 2026; Walker 2026.
[35]Morgenthau 1967, 51.
[36]Herz 1984, 119–56.

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Many realisms, one impasse

Realism is a broad and venerable tradition in the study of world politics. The literature in political and IR theory on what constitutes realist theory and realist foreign policy, its internal and external boundaries, and analytical and normative limitations, is vast.[37] Patrick Porter's recent synthetic defense of it – arguing that realism is moral, realistic, and universal – is a timely and persuasive reminder that the tradition is richer and more philosophically serious than its critics typically allow.[38] The argument that follows is not a rejection of realism per se, but a critique of its limits on this particular question.

Even if one grants Porter's three claims in full, and even if one accepts – with Richard Little[39] and against Barry Buzan[40] – that classical realism and ES theorization of politics and IR are closer than they might first appear, the realist tradition constitutes an impasse when it comes to intelligence. Across its main variants – structural and classical, offensive and defensive, including neoclassical realism – contemporary realist IR theory either renders intelligence theoretically invisible, reduces it to a single instrumental dimension, or turns it into a problem of political theory rather than international theory.

I press structural realism and its variants first, then classical realism, showing in each case where and why the impasse holds.

With the ascent of Waltz, the theoretical integration of intelligence into the structural realist study of international politics is impossible. A scholar of structural realist bent may have a passing or professional interest in intelligence, may even work in or alongside intelligence communities, but ultimately cannot incorporate it into IR theory without betraying the purity of structural IR theory. The reason runs deeper than methodology alone – much deeper than the familiar point that Waltz's systemic turn pushes intelligence below the third level of analysis and renders it a second-image phenomenon, indispensable in practice yet invisible in theory. Waltz's turn to structure is a depoliticization of 'political' realism through a consequential evacuation of the contingent and the morally charged dimensions of political life that so-called 'classical' political realism has retained.[41] What disappears in that evacuation is precisely the kind of practice that intelligence represents. Intelligence is irreducibly political, and intertwined with the deepest forms of power politics, involving stealing secrets, strategic and tactical deception, moral choice, and human agency operating in conditions of existential uncertainty. None of these belong, at least according to Waltz's behavioral social-scientific framework, at the systemic level of analysis. None can be captured by a parsimonious account of capability distributions under anarchy. Morgenthau, who fiercely opposes the simplification of politics to structural or any other mechanics – what he calls the delusion of 'scientific man' – would recognize the problem immediately.[42] Structural realism, in taking out the political, takes out intelligence with it.

[37]Keohane 1986; Smith 1986; Rosenthal 1991; Rose 1998; Lebow 2003; Williams 2005; Scheuerman 2011; Schuett and Hollingworth 2018; Kirshner 2022; Specter 2022; Porter 2025; MacKay 2026.

[38]Porter 2025.

[39]Little 2003.

[40]Buzan 2014.

[41]Tellis 1995; Bessner and Guilhot 2015.

[42]Morgenthau 1946.

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Mearsheimer's offensive realism compounds the problem. For Mearsheimer, states are relentless power maximizers, driven by the anarchic structure of the international system to seek dominance and exploit windows of opportunity whenever they arise.[43] Intelligence, in this framework, would serve one purpose: to accumulate and project state power; to identify vulnerabilities, adversarial capabilities, and above all else, to create tactical and strategic advantage. That is all it would do, and that is all it would need to do. The striking fact that Mearsheimer has not engaged intelligence or espionage in any sustained theoretical way across an extensive body of IR scholarship is entirely consistent with this logic – there is simply nothing theoretically interesting to say beyond confirming that states use it to get ahead.

Yet this is precisely where offensive realism runs into a contradiction of its own making. Mearsheimer's world is built around two key variables: military power and the economic base that sustains it.[44] But military power, especially modern warfare, is almost entirely co-dependent on intelligence. Without intelligence, there cannot be any targeting, nor the propaganda, information operations, or the strategic deceptions that war requires.[45] The same applies to economic power. Industrial espionage, technology theft, financial intelligence, sanctions evasion, and economic warfare are not mere add-ons to great-power competition; rather, given the relentless seeking of economic advantages, particularly when it comes to AI, economic power is intrinsically intertwined with a state's capability – or lack thereof – to wield power.[46] Intelligence, on Mearsheimer's own terms of relentless power struggles, should be a central component of his account of power. That it is not reveals an internal contradiction at the heart of offensive realism. Like Waltz, Mearsheimer operates at the structural level, and intelligence, as a unit-level practice, simply has no place, even though it should. For what the world of secret power has revealed repeatedly is that states engaged in covert conflict routinely collude with their adversaries for a variety of reasons. One is to keep interventions secret; another is managing escalation through shared concealment rather than maximizing advantage. The secrecy of intelligence, in this account, is even in a realist world a mechanism of mutual restraint and social and communicative practice between enemies.[47] Offensive realism cannot account for any of this.

Defensive realism appears to offer a way out of this impasse. Where offensive realism focuses exclusively on capabilities and power maximization, defensive realism takes intentions seriously. Uncertainty about whether adversaries are genuinely security-seeking or inherently greedy drives the security dilemma, and intelligence that reduces that uncertainty can in principle ease rather than intensify competition.[48] The regularized use of national technical means under the SALT and START arms control regimes is the canonical illustration.[49] Surely, both Washington and

[43]Mearsheimer 2001.

[44]Snyder 2002; Karkour 2026.

[45]Handel 1989; Keegan 2003; Warner 2014; Andrew 2018; King 2024.

[46]Carnegie and Carson 2020; Cormac 2022; Sims 2022; Bellaby 2023; Fishman 2025; Akoto and Herr 2026.

[47]Carson 2018; Carnegie and Carson 2020.

[48]Walt 1987; Glaser 1994; 2010.

[49]Gottemoeller 2026, 90–106. Arena and Wolford 2012 offer a formal treatment of intelligence in IR, modeling states' allocation of resources between arming and intelligence gathering prior to crisis bargaining. Their findings confirm the *raison d'état* logic in that intelligence serves survival by reducing uncertainty about adversarial military capabilities. Yet their result that more accurate information can increase the probability

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Moscow deployed intelligence to spy on one another, but with an important qualification to it. They did so to reassure one another, and to manage the security dilemma cooperatively, and in doing so established a form of institutionalized transparency that already points to something about intelligence far beyond the pure survival logic of *raison d'état*, most notably offensive realism.[50]

Yet while defensive realism can, in principle, acknowledge that intelligence reduces uncertainty about intentions, what it cannot do is theorize intelligence as a practice embedded in the normative and institutional life of international society, with its own rules of conduct, its own social logic, and its own relationship to order and justice. The moment intelligence does more than manage the security dilemma, defensive realism would have nothing further to say. And recent scholarship on how leaders assess adversarial intentions reveals a deeper problem still. Decision-makers do not process intelligence in the clean, rational way defensive realism assumes. They tend to rely on personal impressions, prior beliefs, and face-to-face interactions rather than systematic analysis of available information.[51] The gap between what intelligence provides and what leaders actually use to assess intentions is an empirical fact that no contemporary systemic-structuralist realist IR theories – entirely rationalist or social-scientific as they are against Morgenthau's advice – have the methodological means to theorize.

Neoclassical realism comes closest among post-classical realist IR theories to taking and theorizing intelligence seriously. By incorporating domestic politics, leader perceptions, and state-society relations as intervening variables between systemic pressures and foreign policy outputs, it opens analytical space that pure structural realism forecloses.[52] Intelligence could enter this framework as privileged information that shapes how diplomats and foreign policy executives read systemic pressures and mobilize domestic coalitions in response – Western threat disclosures about Russian and Chinese capabilities designed to build public and legislative support for defense spending being a contemporary illustration.[53] A recent neoclassical realist analysis of Australia's policy evolution to the challenge of Chinese foreign direct investment tells the same story. Intelligence agency concerns proved pivotal in driving the policy change, yet the framework could only accommodate them as information flowing into the foreign policy executive, not as a practice worthy of theoretical attention.[54]

However, neoclassical realism treats intelligence merely as a transmission belt. It inherits structural realism's materialist assumptions even as it opens the domestic political level, and those assumptions impose the same ceiling. States spy not simply because a reductionist combination of systemic pressures and domestic politics makes them pursue covert actions, but because states care about whether their

of war for pessimistic states – and that equilibrium allocations diverge from war-minimizing ones – points to precisely the kind of normative and institutional gap that the *raison d'état* framework cannot close and the societal approach is designed to address. Spaniel 2022 extends this insight into cooperative settings, showing that intelligence generated through technical assistance within the nonproliferation regime functions as an informational mechanism that enables bargaining and restraint which is a logic that already belongs to *raison de système* rather than *raison d'état.*

[50]Herman 1996.

[51]Yarhi-Milo 2014.

[52]Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016; Hynek and Šenk 2026.

[53]Gioe and Morell 2024; Leoni and Lilli 2026.

[54]Koga 2025.

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behavior would violate international law and about their normative standing as legitimate members of international society.[55] Intelligence is part of a societal argument, not a purely materialist one, and lies therefore entirely outside the analytical reach of Waltzian-style realist IR theory, which puts parsimony before anything else.

The impasse, in other words, runs through the entire body of systemic-structural realist IR theory. So-called 'classical' realism – which never made Waltz's materialist turn and retained the political, normative, and critical dimensions that structural realism evacuated – might appear to offer something different; and it does, but not in the way one might expect.[56]

If one follows Richard Little's lead that classical realism and ES theorization are closer than they might first appear, then classical realism might be expected to do better on intelligence than its Waltzian-style successors.[57] And while in one sense it could, the impasse holds. Morgenthau and Herz – the two towering figures of mid-twentieth-century classical realism, both German-Jewish émigrés shaped by the experience of survival and exile – were so preoccupied with diplomacy and reform as the master instruments of statecraft that intelligence was of no IR-theoretical concern. Morgenthau's world of *Politics among Nations* was organized around peace through diplomacy, and Herz's around escaping the security dilemma he had himself identified and finding ways for humanity to survive.[58] When Morgenthau did engage intelligence directly – his 1967 critique of CIA domestic activities – he turned not to IR theory but, not surprisingly, to democratic theory, fearing that unchecked intelligence agencies were 'how totalitarianism starts.'[59] Herz recalled his OSS service with some intellectual curiosity and fascination, yet drew no IR-theoretical conclusions from it whatsoever.[60] For both, intelligence was a fact of political and international life that has led to no further theoretical elaboration. Classical realism's analytical and normative energies run toward the twin questions of war and peace, of human survival and global reform, rather than how the practice of spying has shaped international society – that question belongs to ES theorization of world politics.

From survival to international society

Realism, pressed across its main variants, reveals a common ceiling. And the ceiling is both theoretical and methodological, and empirical, as intelligence in practice has long outgrown what any realist IR theory framework can – or could possibly – theorize. Intelligence serves survival and mutual restraint, and the tacit regulation of Cold War and today's superpower competition. After 9/11, the very states that invoked *raison d'état* most aggressively found themselves entangled in normative and legal controversies that no survival logic could resolve. In the Israel–Iran confrontation, covert operations unfold within implicit rules of engagement, thresholds of

[55]Poznansky 2020.

[56]Booth 1991; Schuett and Hollingworth 2018; Kirshner 2022; Lebow 2022; Rösch and Wojczewski 2025; MacKay 2026.

[57]Little 2003.

[58]Morgenthau 1948 [1967]. See Sylvest 2010; Scheuerman 2011; MacKay 2026; Sacks 2026.

[59]Morgenthau 1967, 51.

[60]Herz 1984, 119–56.

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escalation, and calculations of legitimacy that realism simply cannot see. Intelligence, in the real world, is already a societal practice.

Realism's impasse is therefore not so much a failure of individual realists or variants, but one inbuilt into that IR tradition's assumptions. A methodological framework built around survival, material power, and anarchy as master concepts cannot capture what intelligence does in international society. It cannot ask what norms govern intelligence practice, what role intelligence plays in sustaining or undermining international order, or under what conditions intelligence serves justice rather than merely power. Yet these are questions that a serious IR theory must be able to answer – and ES theory is equipped to ask and answer.

Where there are spies, there is society

Going beyond the realism impasse, the argument now is that intelligence is not merely an instrument states deploy in the international system but a social practice that helps constitute and sustain international society. The conceptual key is Adam Watson's notion of *raison de système*, extended here, for the first time, to the practice of intelligence.[61]

I develop this argument across three sub-sections. First, I establish intelligence as *raison de système*, showing through the Cold War informal code and the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance that intelligence operates as an ordering practice of international society. Second, I ground the argument in the structural relationship between intelligence and diplomacy, advancing a three-position analytical framework that moves from the conventional treatment of the two practices as distinct, through intelligence as shadow diplomacy, to the maximalist claim that intelligence and diplomacy are two faces of a single coin whose value is international order. Third, I bring the argument into dialogue with the emerging international law of intelligence, showing that the Grotian prediction at the heart of ES thinking – where there is society, there is law – is already being fulfilled.

I conclude that intelligence warrants ES theorization and warrants it on the ES's own terms: because *raison de système*, institutions, and the normative architecture of international society are precisely the categories that the practice of intelligence, properly understood, inhabits and activates.

Intelligence as raison de système

If realist IR theory would view intelligence as an instrument of survival in a world without overarching authority, the 'societal approach' understands it as a rule-governed practice that helps to sustain order within that same anarchy.[62] For the Grotian rationalist, the problem of international life is not merely how to survive, but how to coexist and build and maintain the institutional practices that make coexistence durable. States may compete, but they also recognize that unrestrained competition threatens the very system upon which their security depends. Rationalism therefore places emphasis on diplomacy, international law, and other primary

[61]Watson 1992, 14; Terradas 2025.

[62]Following Buzan (2014), I use the terms ES and societal approach interchangeably.

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institutions as mechanisms through which states communicate, regulate behavior, and manage risk.[63]

The conceptual key is Adam Watson's notion of *raison de système*, the recognition that it 'pays to make the system work.'[64] Where *raison d'état* captures the logic of survival, *raison de système* captures the willingness of states as legitimate members of international society to invest in the shared rules and institutions that make orderly coexistence possible, even at some cost to short-term advantage. Watson's concept has typically been applied to diplomacy and great-power management, but, as I suggest, it can be, and should be, extended to the practice of stealing secrets. Intelligence, through this societal lens, is one of international society's primary practices, understood as an ordering practice through which states manage strategic and political uncertainty, sustain communication across adversarial divides, and produce and reproduce the shared understandings of legitimate and illegitimate conduct that give international society its normative texture.

This conceptual reframing is not merely theoretical and methodological. The history of intelligence is intimately connected to diplomatic history and the history of war, each of which – diplomacy and war – the ES has long recognized as a primary institution in the history of international society.[65] That connection is very real. Intelligence supplies the informational foundation on which diplomacy depends and shapes the conduct of war by defining threats and battlefields. To say that intelligence is bound up with diplomacy and war might therefore suggest that if those practices carry primary institution status, the question of whether intelligence shares in that status becomes a serious theoretical question; this article does not resolve that question but opens it.

The Cold War illustrates the ordering dimension of intelligence. The superpower rivalry was, rightly described, an 'epic intelligence war between East and West.'[66] Yet wars have goals and rules, and even within that intelligence war, spying served as a mechanism of systemic stabilization. Through the regularized exchange of information (overt or covert) and the maintenance of predictable channels of contact, intelligence helped to sustain what might be called a 'negative or precarious peace.'[67] Tacit understandings about what counted as acceptable espionage – mutual tolerance of surveillance satellites, diplomatic listening posts, the unspoken rules governing the treatment of captured operatives – reflected the existence of an informal code of conduct among adversaries.[68] This code was neither codified nor was it acknowledged publicly, but it was a shared normative framework generated by repeated interaction and sustained by the recognition that its collapse would cost both sides more than its maintenance. In the most strategic contexts – the management of nuclear deterrence – intelligence practices contributed to order by reducing the likelihood of miscalculation.

The FVEY intelligence alliance raises this logic from the bilateral to the systemic level, and in doing so makes visible the full institutional ambition of intelligence as *raison de système*. Comprising the United States, UK, Canada, Australia, and

[63]Buzan 2023, 11–7.
[64]Watson 1992, 14; Terradas 2025.
[65]Andrew 2018, 3; Buzan 2023, 15.
[66]Walton 2023.
[67]Kacowicz 2025, 34.
[68]Herman 1996, 200–18.

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New Zealand, the FVEY arrangement originated in wartime SIGINT cooperation but evolved into a deeply embedded framework for information sharing, coordination, and collective surveillance.[69] The FVEY is, within ES theorization, a secondary institution because what these five countries, over time, have institutionalized is a formalized practice that both reflects and reinforces the primary institutions of diplomacy, war, and great-power management.[70] The FVEY institutionalizes the *raison de système* impulse to make the international system work through trust, rules, and shared purpose in the very shadows of conventional foreign policy conduct.[71]

However, the FVEY also reveals the normative tensions that intelligence as *raison de système* cannot escape. The FVEY is an exclusive arrangement, descended from an Anglo-Saxon strategic culture, and yet its members champion a rules-based international order grounded in liberal values. This dual identity – particularist in membership, universalist in aspiration – makes the FVEY an especially revealing site for examining the interplay between order and justice in contemporary international society. Its post-9/11 history, in which FVEY cooperation extended to extraordinary rendition, mass surveillance, and practices that tested the limits of legality and legitimacy, demonstrates the ease with which *raison de système* can collapse back into *raison d'état* when institutional norms are under pressure. Yet the FVEY's response to Russia's 2022 full-scale military invasion of Ukraine tells the other half of the story. The unprecedented declassification of intelligence in the months preceding and following the invasion was in large part a FVEY operation to uphold the norms of international society.

Taken together, and against purely realistic accounts, the Cold War informal code and the FVEY demonstrate that intelligence is a practice through which states produce, sustain, and at times contest the shared norms and institutional arrangements that constitute that society. Whether this practice has crystallized sufficiently to warrant the designation of primary institution is a question that requires more sustained historical and analytical inquiry. What the societal approach establishes is that the question is serious – and that the practice of intelligence, examined through the lenses of diplomacy and international law respectively, is precisely where its answer must be sought.

Order and the intelligence–diplomacy nexus

To begin with diplomacy, I argue for a three-position analytical framework that maps the relationship between intelligence and diplomacy with increasing theoretical ambition.

[69]Kerbaj 2022; Walsh 2025.

[70]Schuett and Williams 2024. Secondary institutions, such as the UN, IMF, ASEAN, NATO, are formally organized expressions of primary institutions. See Knudsen and Navari 2019.

[71]The question may be raised whether intelligence collected for the defense of an ally rather than the collecting state itself fits the triadic framework. The FVEY is instructive: FVEY members routinely collect and share intelligence for each other's defense, not only their own survival. This sits at the intersection of *raison d'état* and *raison de système.* Alliance intelligence serves the collecting state's survival indirectly through the survival of the ally, but it also sustains the alliance as an institutional arrangement that is itself an expression of *raison de système.* The ambiguity is not a deficiency but an illustration of the triadic framework's core point: the three logics are not mutually exclusive categories but overlapping and sometimes simultaneously operative orientations. The same holds for complicated intelligence liaison relationships with states outside the democratic sphere or ambivalent about the liberal international order, which may appear institutional in form (*raison de système*) while functioning as *raison d'état* in practice.

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The first position treats intelligence and diplomacy as distinct practices that interact contingently but remain institutionally and conceptually separate. I take this position seriously before rejecting it, because it represents the conventional wisdom that the argument must displace. The second position moves beyond the conventional view by arguing that intelligence functions as the covert register through which diplomatic functions are performed when the official register is unavailable or insufficient. This position has a distinguished intellectual pedigree and is already sufficient to establish what I call the minimalist claim: that ES theorization is the uniquely appropriate home for intelligence in IR.

The third position is the most demanding, and the one toward which this section builds. I argue that intelligence and diplomacy are not two practices that happen to overlap, nor one practice subordinate to the other, but two faces of a single coin whose value is international order. On this reading – which I call the maximalist claim – the designation of diplomacy as a primary institution of international society already implies a claim about intelligence that ES theorization has not yet made explicit but cannot avoid making without theoretical inconsistency. I do not fully resolve the question of which position to prefer here; that resolution depends on a further dimension of the argument, developed in the next section, that the diplomatic evidence alone cannot supply.

First, the conventional view holds that intelligence and diplomacy are distinct practices with distinct logics, cultures, histories, people, institutional homes, and normative frameworks. The CIA is not the State Department. MI6 is not the Foreign Office. Stealing is not negotiating. A spy is not a diplomat. On this account, intelligence and diplomacy interact – intelligence informs diplomatic judgment, diplomatic cover enables intelligence operations – but the interaction is contingent rather than structural, and neither is theoretically dependent on the other. This position has the virtue of institutional accuracy, as intelligence and diplomatic services are, in most states, formally separate bureaucracies with separate mandates and chains of command. The problem, however, is that institutional separation does not mean conceptual separation or independence. The fact that the CIA and the State Department occupy different buildings tells us nothing about whether the practices they house are theoretically distinct. And once the question is posed at the level of practice rather than organization, the conventional view begins to crumble. It cannot account for the cases examined below, and the first position, in short, keeps intelligence theoretically marginal.

The second position represents the first genuinely revisionist claim I advance in this section. It argues that intelligence functions as the covert means through which diplomatic functions are performed when the official register is unavailable or insufficient. This position has a distinguished intellectual pedigree that I draw on deliberately. When the Dutch diplomat Abraham de Wicquefort, writing in 1681, described the ambassador as simultaneously 'a messenger of peace on one hand and like an honorable spy on the other,' he was anatomizing a function.[72] The French diplomat François de Callières, whose manual of diplomatic method remained authoritative into the eighteenth century, was equally direct: 'The two primary goals of a negotiator are to conduct his master's business, and to discover the business of others.'[73] Secrecy, on this account, is not the antithesis of diplomacy but its norm.

[72]Wicquefort 1681, cited in Colson 2008, 181.
[73]De Callières 1716, cited in Colson 2008, 192.

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'Secrecy is the weapon of negotiation,' in de Callières's phrase, without which the ambassador could neither protect his own position nor penetrate the intentions of those across the table.[74] Intelligence and diplomacy share a common genealogy and address the problem of the management of uncertainty under anarchy, woven together at the level of the ambassador's own office, where representation and espionage are not sequential or separate functions but simultaneous ones.[75]

Cases confirm this reading. When the CIA and MI6 facilitated the disarmament of Libya's weapons of mass destruction program between 2001 and 2003, intelligence officers conducted the negotiations that produced a diplomatic outcome – Muammar Gaddafi's public renunciation of WMD – that no official diplomatic channel could have achieved without prejudicing the result.[76] This case is particularly instructive because the intelligence services did not support the diplomacy but were the diplomacy. Israel's use of Mossad as a sustained alternative diplomatic channel – conducting negotiations, delivering messages, and managing relationships with states that officially do not recognize its existence – represents the same logic institutionalized as permanent practice.[77] In both cases, the intelligence services perform diplomatic functions that the official context forbids, yet do so not as a further deviation from international order but to maintain it.

The Ankara meeting of autumn 2021 in the context of Ukraine sharpens the argument even further. As Russian forces massed on Ukraine's borders, then-CIA Director William Burns – a career diplomat before he became Director of Central Intelligence – traveled to Turkey for a direct meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Naryshkin. No communiqué was issued, no agreement reached. What was performed was intelligence as diplomatic signaling, as a channel through which Washington conveyed, with the authority that only a direct senior exchange could carry, that the costs of invasion had been assessed and would be enforced.[78] The choice of an intelligence channel over a diplomatic one was not a failure of diplomacy. Rather, it was a deliberate deployment of covert power for a purpose – credible communication under conditions of maximum tension – that the official diplomatic channel could not serve. Burns's dual identity, as one of America's most accomplished diplomats and its intelligence chief, personifies the empirical and theoretical point: that the practices converge in the person, just as they converged in the office of the ambassador four centuries earlier.

My claim is that the second position is stronger than the first one, and I hold that it is already sufficient to establish the minimalist claim of this section. To theorize intelligence in the realm of IR, what is required is to see a practice that is both covert and constitutive, and simultaneously a violation of sovereignty and a condition of international order. The foundational ES logics of *raison de système* as well as primary and secondary institutions map directly onto the practice that the second position describes. The minimalist claim requires nothing more than to acknowledge that any conceptualization of diplomacy as a primary institution of international society is

[74]Colson 2008, 185.

[75]Neumann 2003, 346, drawing on Wight 1977. Neumann's observation that diplomacy and espionage 'can become one and the same' is offered as a sociological observation about diplomatic practice rather than a theoretical argument. I am treating it here as the latter.

[76]Andrew 2018, 756–8.

[77]Ibid., 4.

[78]See Burns 2019.

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incomplete without some form of intelligence theorization through which diplomatic order is sustained. On this second view alone, the ES is the necessary theoretical home for intelligence in IR.

However, there is a need to push further than that. The minimalist position treats intelligence as shadow diplomacy – as derivative, as subordinate, as the covert auxiliary of the primary diplomatic function.[79] The third position rejects that binary hierarchy, and I want to suggest that intelligence and diplomacy are not one practice but two faces of a single coin, and that the coin is maintaining international order.

On the position two reading (minimalism), diplomacy is the primary practice, and intelligence is merely one of its covert means. On the position three reading (maximalism), both practices are expressions of a single deeper logic: the management of international order under conditions of anarchy, uncertainty, and mutual surveillance. Neither is prior, neither is derivative, as both diplomacy and intelligence are instantiations of the same imperative – the imperative, in Watson's terms, to make the system work for the members of international society *(raison de système)* – and what makes them differ from one another are the means through which that imperative is discharged.

The Ukraine declassification campaign of 2021–2022 is perhaps the most powerful available illustration of this logic in operation. From late 2021 through the opening months of the full-scale invasion, the United States and its allies conducted an unprecedented campaign of pre-emptive intelligence disclosure through intelligence and public channels, releasing assessments of Russian military planning, operational intentions, and disinformation strategies before the events they feared would occur or described had occurred, respectively. The purpose was tripartite: to deter the invasion by demonstrating that its operational premises were transparent; to consolidate alliance cohesion by giving partners a shared intelligence picture; and to pre-empt the disinformation narratives through which Russia had managed the information environment in 2014.[80] What makes this case theoretically decisive for the maximalist position is the disclosure itself plus what the decision to disclose reveals about the logic governing it. Intelligence services exist, institutionally, to accumulate (read: steal) advantage through secrecy. The decision to declassify – to sacrifice informational advantage for diplomatic and systemic effect – represents a deliberate subordination of *raison d'état* logic to *raison de système* logic.[81]

The tension between the institutional intelligence imperative to protect sources and methods and the contingent political imperative to use intelligence for collective ends is a defining tension of intelligence cooperation, for states that share secrets to sustain international order must sacrifice the very secrecy on which their intelligence power depends.[82]

The theoretical consequence of the third position is why I call it the maximalist claim. If intelligence and diplomacy are two faces of the same ordering coin – if you cannot have the diplomat without the spy, as Wicquefort, de Callières, and four centuries of practice consistently demonstrate – then the designation of diplomacy as a primary institution of international society already implies a claim about

[79]I use shadow, clandestine, or crypto diplomacy synonymously. Westerfield 1996; Scott 2004; Gentry 2021.

[80]Zegart 2023; Gioe and Morell 2024.

[81]Carson 2018.

[82]Carnegie and Carson 2020.

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intelligence that the ES cannot avoid without theoretical inconsistency. Whether that claim can be sustained depends not only on the diplomatic evidence examined here but on whether international society has generated, around the practice of intelligence, a normative and legal structure commensurate with its ordering function. That is a question the diplomatic argument cannot answer alone. It is to that question, and to the strongest available external corroboration of the maximalist claim, that the next section turns.

The Grotian corroboration: A lex specialis

Connecting the Grotian notion of *Ubi societas, ibi ius* – where there is society, there is law – to intelligence matters, which, no doubt, include dark aspects such as lying, betraying, stealing, killing, must be fanciful. But ES theorization from Manning to Bull to the present generation has always insisted that international law and international society developed hand in hand and are historically and logically inseparable.[83]

In this section, I ask whether the emerging international law of intelligence bears out the Grotian notion and what the answer – I argue that it does – tells us about intelligence's status in international society. The legal argument presented here provides corroboration of the maximalist claim advanced in the previous section. I proceed in three steps: mapping the current state of the legal debate; showing that the legal debate, on its minimalist reading, makes the ES framework not merely useful but necessary; and showing that the legal debate, on its maximalist reading, makes the primary institution claim for intelligence theoretically possible.

In legal debates on intelligence, the conventional starting point in international law is what Simon Chesterman has called the 'legal penumbra' of espionage, whereby intelligence occupies a zone of deliberate legal ambiguity, neither clearly permitted nor clearly prohibited by international law, and of deliberate moral ambiguity in terms of international legitimacy.[84] States spy. States know that other states spy, and international law has little, if anything at all, to say about it – let alone to attempt regulation. This extralegal position treats intelligence as a political fact that law cannot or should not address. In purely descriptive terms, it is quite an accurate position: there is no treaty on peacetime espionage, no explicit customary prohibition, no international court that has directly adjudicated the legality of state intelligence operations. However, descriptive accuracy is not the same as theoretical adequacy because a practice so ancient, so deeply embedded in the conduct of IR, and so consequential for its ordering, cannot be satisfactorily left in permanent legal silence – and the Grotian position, as Asaf Lubin has shown, is already being borne out in the direction of legal development, which now speaks more richly and with greater precision in times of peace than in times of war.[85]

The second position – generalism – argues that intelligence is already fully subject to existing general norms of international law: sovereignty, the Vienna Conventions on diplomatic relations, human rights law, the UN Charter. On this reading, no specialized framework is needed because the general framework already applies and, in most cases, prohibits. The problem, as Lubin has shown in the most comprehensive

[83]Schmidt 2020, 491; Wilson 2021, 18.
[84]Chesterman 2006, 1130.
[85]Lubin 2026, 3.

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legal treatment of the subject to date, is that generalism produces a conclusion that states manifestly reject in practice: if general international law applied strictly, virtually all peacetime intelligence activity would be illegal.[86] However, in the real world, states do not behave as if they believe this to have any meaning, let alone coercive legal consequences, and the gap between the generalist position in international law and state practice in IR is too large to be explained away.

Which brings the legal debate – and IR theorization of intelligence – to the third position: specialization, which is Lubin's own. The argument is that intelligence has generated, through state practice and *opinio juris*, a specialized customary regime – what Lubin calls the International Law of Intelligence – that is distinct from and not reducible to general prohibitive rules.[87] This regime is organized around the principles of necessity, proportionality, and efficacy, and structured through a tripartite framework – *jus ad explorationem*, *jus in exploratione*, and *jus post explorationem* – governing the authorization and decision to resort to espionage, governing its conduct, and governing the consequences of intelligence operations, respectively. What is important is that the *lex specialis* claim does not merely describe current law, but that it makes a normative argument about what the law should recognize given what intelligence actually does in IR, for the international order. Lubin is explicit that intelligence has a functional role in sustaining that order: international organizations, such as the UN, NATO, and the IAEA, depend on member-state intelligence they cannot themselves produce, and the architecture of international peace and security depends, in ways that cannot be wished away, on the continuous flow of intelligence among states.[88] The Grotian notion is clear: intelligence is generating its own body of international law because international society requires it to.

What the three-position taxonomy reveals, for the purposes of ES-style theorization of intelligence, is that the legal debate about intelligence presupposes an IR argument that it cannot itself supply. The extralegal position presupposes that intelligence is a political fact, but it offers no account of what kind of political fact, what social function it performs, or why that function might generate legal consequences. The generalist position presupposes that intelligence is a sovereign violation, but it cannot explain why states have consistently declined to treat it as one, or why the practice persists and deepens precisely among states most committed to a rules-based international order. The specialization position presupposes that intelligence is a practice with a distinctive social function that warrants distinctive legal treatment, but it offers no social-theoretical account of what that function is or why it is distinctive.

That social-theoretical account is what ES theorization can provide. The *raison de système* argument establishes that intelligence is not merely a tool of national power that states use within international society but a practice through which international society constitutes and sustains itself. The intelligence–diplomacy argument establishes that this practice is structurally internal to the primary institution of diplomacy, and that the ordering function of intelligence has been recognized, in practice if not in theory, for many centuries. Together, these arguments supply the IR theory foundation that Lubin's legalistic position requires. In doing so, the ES is not merely

[86]Lubin 2026.
[87]Lubin 2020a, 2020b, 2026.
[88]Lubin 2026.

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one theoretical option for understanding intelligence in international law (and IR), it is perhaps the only framework that can provide the social-theoretical ground on which a serious legal account of intelligence must stand. I use Lubin's position, therefore, in terms of a mutual foundationality: Lubin's project of an International Law of Intelligence needs, at least as I see it, the societal approach to explain why intelligence warrants specialized legal treatment; and the societal approach toward intelligence (for which I am arguing) needs the International Law of Intelligence to demonstrate that its theoretical claims have legal consequences that states and courts must eventually confront.

Yet Lubin's *lex specialis* argument does more than corroborate the minimalist claim of intelligence being a deeply social practice in international society that warrants going beyond any realist orthodoxy. For the *lex specialis* position is twofold: that intelligence warrants specialized legal treatment, and that intelligence is a necessary precondition for the functioning of the broader legal and political order. If international organizations depend on member-state intelligence to function, and if the architecture of international security, war, and peace, depends on continuous intelligence flows among states, then intelligence is a practice that international society requires for its own functioning; and the practice of intelligence that international society requires for its own functioning is, by the ES's own definition of primary institutions as deep and relatively durable social practices that shape the character of international society, a candidate for that designation.[89]

The Grotian foundation returns with full force. If *ubi societas ibi ius* – and if intelligence is constitutive of the society that generates that law – then Lubin's account of International Law of Intelligence is the legal expression of what the societal approach has been arguing all along: that intelligence belongs not at the margins of international society but at its center, and that, therefore, IR theorization of intelligence in general, and in terms of the societal ES approach in particular, is long overdue.

I want to be precise about what the maximalist claim does and does not assert. It does not claim that intelligence has already achieved primary institution status, nor that the historical and comparative inquiry required to establish such a claim has been completed. What it claims is that the convergence of the IR argument developed here and the legal argument developed by Lubin makes the primary institution question unavoidable. When IR theory and international law, proceeding independently and by different methods, arrive at the same recognition – that intelligence is constitutive of the order both disciplines study – the most parsimonious explanation is that the practice is doing exactly what the convergent arguments say it is doing. The societal ES approach is the only IR tradition whose foundational commitments make that convergence not merely visible but theoretically intelligible. Whether the primary institution designation for intelligence can ultimately be sustained is a question that requires sustained historical and analytical inquiry well beyond the scope of this article. What this article establishes is that the question is serious, that the societal ES approach is the right framework within which to pursue it, and that the Grotian notion and prediction with which this section opened – where there is society, there is law – has already begun, in the emerging international law of intelligence, to be fulfilled.

[89]On primary institutions, see Falkner and Buzan 2019, 133–7; Buzan 2023, 14–5.

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The societal approach, as this section has argued, is a well-equipped theoretical home for intelligence in IR, much better than realist IR theory, but going beyond ES is a test of whether it is also a sufficient one, and what the primary institution horizon demands of both the ES and its critics.

Pushing the societal approach

The societal approach establishes that intelligence is a rule-governed practice embedded in the normative and institutional life of international society. But it does not exhaust the subject.

I push the societal approach in – and from – two directions. The first is from without: critical approaches challenge the framework's Western, state-centric assumptions and demand that the triadic mapping accounts for whose survival, whose order, and whose humanity. The second is from within: if the ES framework is right that intelligence is a rule-governed, normatively structured practice constitutive of international society, then the logic of that argument points toward a question the framework itself must answer – whether intelligence qualifies as a primary institution.

This section addresses each in turn. It first develops the notion of *raison d'humanité*, arguing that intelligence can serve ends that transcend state interest – and that solidarist IR theory is the only tradition equipped to theorize that possibility. It then engages critical approaches, acknowledging their permanent challenge to any ES account. It closes by advancing the primary institution suggestion as a research horizon; it is not a conclusion the article delivers, but a question it makes possible.

Intelligence as raison d'humanité

Intelligence is not only a tool of survival or an instrument of order. It can also be a practice of justice. At first glance, approaching intelligence from the perspective that Wight called Kantian revolutionism – the body of IR theory broadly associated with Kant, world society, something resembling a world of humans,[90] the moral purpose of international order – appears counterintuitive. Intelligence is, after all, widely seen as the archetype of a proto-Westphalian state system based on sovereignty, self-interest and nothing but survival at any cost. However, it is precisely this tension between what intelligence in practice is, ought to be, and can be, that makes looking beyond the ordinary so valuable, both empirically and theoretically.

The whole set of intelligence tools used to spy, steal, conceal, and manipulate can also expose atrocity, prevent conflict, and uphold the rule of law. When used to warn of atrocities, to guide humanitarian intervention, or to document war crimes, intelligence contributes to 'saving strangers,' thereby attempting to morally expand international society beyond the rigid strictures of the sovereign state.[91] In such contexts – and it should be noted that whether intelligence agencies are directed by their governments toward such ends (or any other ends) is primarily a question of political will – secrecy need not contradict justice; in fact, it can make justice possible by uncovering what would otherwise remain hidden without using the intelligence

[90]Bain 2021.
[91]Wheeler 2000.

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tools required to uncover or, literally, to unbury them.[92] Alongside *raison d'état* and *raison de système*, this possibility or logic introduces a third kind of reasoning – what may be called *raison d'humanité*, reflecting the conviction that the responsible use of intelligence can serve humans and humanity as a global collective rather than any state or nation.[93]

The most direct empirical cases involve the use of intelligence in the documentation and prosecution of mass atrocities. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia provides a lesson in intelligence-justice cooperation. Unable to gather reliable evidence from active war zones, the tribunal relied on the capabilities of national intelligence services, out of which came Rule 70 – a procedural innovation allowing states to share sensitive material without compromising sources or methods. In the trial of Slobodan Milošević, Washington waived confidentiality to permit the testimony of former NATO commander General Wesley Clark, whose account helped link the Serbian leader to the Srebrenica genocide.[94] Beyond the courtroom, the pursuit of indicted war criminals through Operation Amber Star combined CIA, MI6, Delta Force, and SAS assets in a clandestine NATO-led manhunt that pioneered techniques later used in counterterrorism.[95] More recently, in July 2023, the United States under the Biden Administration announced it would share intelligence on Russian atrocities directly with the International Criminal Court, which was a historic departure from Washington's traditional wariness toward the Court, and a signal that accountability for war crimes had become a shared strategic interest to uphold the norms regulating war.[96]

What these cases establish is not that intelligence has become a humanitarian practice, but that it contains a humanitarian possibility that existing IR theory has no framework to theorize. The tension between that possibility and the survival and order logics that dominate intelligence in practice is not a defect of the *raison d'humanité* argument but its core. Intelligence agencies guard their secrets as the final frontier of state sovereignty, while international society requires transparency. The proceedings against Radovan Karadžić, who claimed an undisclosed immunity deal with US officials, illustrate the collision directly, when his defense demanded access to American intelligence under Rule 70, and Washington refused on national security grounds.[97] Solidarist ES theorization is valuable here precisely because it sits in friction with the survival and order logics that constitute the practice. The objection that humanitarian intelligence cooperation may ultimately serve state interest rather than genuine solidarist purpose does not refute this argument. That *raison d'humanité* is perpetually pulled back toward *raison d'état* and *raison de système* is precisely what makes it the most demanding and least reliably realized of

[92]The possibilities for directing intelligence agencies are endless – 'The goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.' Morgenthau 1948 [1967], 8–9.

[93]Nantermoz and Turan 2025.

[94]Ripley 2025, 191–8.

[95]Borger 2016, 1–14.

[96]Hunnicutt and Ali 2023.

[97]Ripley 2025, 197–98. Carnegie and Carson 2020, 193–239 show that disclosing intelligence to document atrocities and support international legal accountability face the dilemma that the same transparency that serves justice risks exposing sources and methods that states regard as *raison d'état* sovereign prerogatives.

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the three logics, and precisely why its theorization requires a framework capable of holding all three in view simultaneously rather than collapsing them into one.

Whose survival, whose order, whose humanity

Situating intelligence across three logics – *raison d'état*, *raison de système*, and *raison d'humanité* – reveals a practice that is at once more complex, more socially embedded, and more normatively consequential than the conventional IR silence on the subject allows. Yet the framework is not without blind spots, and it is the task of critical and radical approaches to name them.[98]

The most important challenge comes from International Political Sociology, and in particular from the body of work associated with Hager Ben Jaffel, Sebastian Larsson, and their collaborators.[99] The study of intelligence, they argue, has been historically structured around the interests of state intelligence agencies and the demands of policymakers, producing theories for intelligence rather than theories of intelligence.[100] From that perspective, even most sociologically sophisticated accounts of intelligence – including ES-inflected ones – would remain prisoners of a state-centric and functionalist ontology. The consequence is an analytical framework that takes the state-centric organization of intelligence as a given, naturalizes it, and in doing so fails to interrogate how that organization was historically produced, whose interests it serves, and what it excludes.

This critical critique has genuine bite when applied to the ES framework. Working within the triadic mapping of intelligence – survival (realism), order (rationalism), humanity (revolutionism) – theorizes what intelligence does for states, for international society, and for humans. But it does not ask who benefits from this arrangement, or how the very categories of survival, order, and humanity are politically constructed. Whose survival counts? Which international order? Humanity as defined by whom, and from where? The ES framework risks remaining deeply embedded in a particular – largely Western, largely liberal – experience of intelligence practice. The Anglo-Western FVEY world is the implicit referent; other traditions and experiences appear, if at all, as footnotes.[101]

The critical tradition also draws much-needed attention to the expanding social space of intelligence – potentially well beyond the state agencies that conventional and ES-oriented accounts foreground. Ben Jaffel and Larsson show that intelligence, understood as a social phenomenon, involves a heterogeneous field of actors: police forces, border agencies, private contractors, technology firms, international lawyers, civil-society organizations, and even ordinary citizens enrolled as informants through counter-radicalization programs.[102] This expansion is both a correct empirical observation and a theoretical challenge because it asks whether, if intelligence is this plural, this contested, and this pervasive, any framework that centers the state intelligence agency as its primary unit of analysis can claim to capture it adequately.

[98]Within intelligence studies, see Newbery and Kaunert 2023.

[99]Ben Jaffel et al. 2020; Ben Jaffel and Larsson 2022.

[100]The distinction between theory 'for' and theory 'of' intelligence is developed in Ben Jaffel et al. 2020, 324–6. On the functionalist disposition of Intelligence Studies more broadly, see Bean 2018.

[101]Aldrich and Kasuku 2012; Davies and Gustafson 2013; de Graaff 2020; Wong 2026.

[102]Ben Jaffel et al. 2020, 336–40; Ben Jaffel and Larsson 2022.

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These are serious challenges, and the *raison d'humanité* argument advanced here is itself vulnerable to the charge because the solidarist potential of intelligence – its capacity to serve justice and accountability – has been realized almost exclusively through the capabilities and decisions of Western state agencies, operating within institutional frameworks designed to protect their sources and methods first. International criminal justice depends on intelligence, but intelligence has consistently conditioned that dependence on its own terms.

The critical tradition's challenge to ES theorization is permanent and productive. Its questions of whose survival, whose order, and whose humanity the triadic mapping serves will need to be asked as intelligence practice evolves, as new actors enter the field, and as non-Western intelligence cultures demand theoretical attention on their own terms. The ES approach advanced here does not claim immunity from that interrogation.

What it does claim, however, is that interrogation is not dissolution. The critical insight that intelligence is more plural, more contested, and more socially pervasive than any state-centric account can fully capture is compatible with – indeed, requires – a prior account of what the institutional core of that practice is, how it became durable, and what normative structure it has generated across international society. Without that account, the critical tradition has no stable object to critique. ES theorization provides that object, while critical and radical approaches may sharpen it, and the tension between them is the productive tension of IR theorization that takes its subject seriously.

That tension has one further consequence. The question that critical approaches cannot answer – whether the practice of intelligence has acquired sufficient depth, durability, and normative structure to warrant the designation of primary institution – is precisely the question that ES theorization is equipped to ask.

Stealing secrets: The primary institution hypothesis

The concept of primary institution, as re-modeled within ES theorization by Barry Buzan and refined in collaboration with Robert Falkner, designates those deep, evolved practices that do not merely regulate international society but constitute it.[103] Primary institutions are not designed purely functionally; they emerge through the accumulated practice of political communities across time, acquiring normative structure, shared expectations, and a resilience that formal organizations rarely match. The canonical examples – sovereignty, diplomacy, war, international law, the balance of power – share one defining feature: they are practices without which international society, as an anarchical society, would not exist.

This article has argued that intelligence, once rescued from realist orthodoxy, warrants sustained ES theorization – what the preceding sections called the minimalist position. It has also advanced the maximalist claim: that intelligence and diplomacy are two faces of a single ordering coin, and that Lubin's *lex specialis* argument supplies the legal corroboration that the IR argument alone cannot. Together, these positions generate a question that neither can individually answer: whether intelligence has acquired sufficient depth, durability, and normative structure across international society to warrant designation as a primary institution. The

[103]Buzan 2004, 161–204; 2023, 11–5.

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four criteria that ES theorization has developed for establishing such status suggest the question is serious.[104]

First, the collection and use of secret information about adversaries is not a product of the modern state system but predates Westphalia by millennia. Across Barry Buzan's three eras of world history – the hunter-gatherer era, the conglomerate agrarian and pastoralist empires, and the modern era[105] – espionage stands out as one of the few practices to have endured and adapted continuously. From the Mari letters of ancient Mesopotamia to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, from the Ottoman *barīd* to the Cold War intelligence architectures of both blocs, the underlying logic of managing uncertainty through stealing secrets has proved among the most durable in political history.[106] Whether we like what intelligence services do at a certain point in history or not, one would be hard-pressed not to acknowledge that what we have here in international society is a near-universally accepted practice – a global norm of secrecy.

Second, the development of secondary institutions – I think here of the FVEY, NATO intelligence structures, the EU's Intelligence Analysis Centre (INTCEN) and Intelligence College in Europe, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, the African Union's Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa – demonstrates that intelligence practices have been formalized into rule-governed cooperative arrangements across different political and normative orders.[107] These are not merely functional agreements because they embed intelligence work and sustained cooperation within shared epistemic cultures, classification systems, and accountability frameworks that reproduce the practice across generations of (member) states.

Third, intelligence has been internalized within states as a structural principle of governance and a marker of political legitimacy. Permanent intelligence agencies – in East and West, as well as in the Global South – are political and bureaucratic expressions of the state's relationship to knowledge, uncertainty, and sovereignty. As Michael Warner observes, secrecy has acquired 'prevalence and institutional endurance' precisely because it has become normal rather than exceptional.[108] It has become a routine feature of modern political administration across liberal, authoritarian, and postcolonial orders alike.

Fourth, intelligence does not operate in isolation from other primary institutions, such as diplomacy, war, and international law. At a minimum, stealing secrets sustains diplomacy by supplying the information that makes negotiation and deterrence possible, and at a maximum it becomes the diplomacy vis-à-vis another state. Intelligence makes war possible, and it shapes the conduct of war by structuring perceptions of threat and capability, influencing both the initiation and the limitation of force. And, finally, the practice of intelligence has generated a specialized body of international law produced not by deliberate legislation but by the evolution of norms

[104]Falkner and Buzan 2019; Buzan and Falkner 2025, 15–20. There are four empirical reference points for establishing primary institution status: the emergence of a global norm; the development of secondary institutions that sustain and regulate it; its internalization within states as a marker of legitimacy and political identity; and its interaction with other primary institutions through which it co-produces order and justice.

[105]Buzan 2023, 11–5.

[106]Andrew 2018; Macrakis 2023.

[107]Zhao et al. 2024; Cave 2026; Díaz Matey 2026; Gruszczak 2026.

[108]Warner 2012, 224.

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around what states may and may not do in the intelligence domain. Primary institutions are exactly those practices that generate their own normative frameworks through societal evolution rather than purely functional design, and intelligence has done exactly that.

The stakes of the designation are analytical and normative. Primary institutions carry normative weight, and they do 'have normative impact: we judge actors and behaviours against compliance with the aspirations primary institutions create. Primary institutions make possible naming "bad" actors and "misbehaviour."'[109] Whether intelligence qualifies as one helps establish whether we can name states that violate its norms and hold them accountable.

The objection that this risks conceptual inflation of the primary institution category deserves a direct answer.[110] The warning of having too many is legitimate. Primary institution status should not be awarded to every ancient and widespread practice. The real test is all at once: longevity, universality, and constitutive role. Intelligence meets that test. International society's capacity to manage uncertainty, sustain deterrence, conduct diplomacy, prosecute war, and enforce international law all depends, in ways that cannot be wished away, on continuous flows of secret information among states. A practice upon which the functioning of every other primary institution, especially diplomacy and war, depends is not a candidate for the margins of ES theorization but for its theoretical core. Whether the practice of intelligence meets the full criteria for primary institution status requires the kind of sustained historical and comparative inquiry that lies beyond the scope of this article. What this article has done is make that inquiry possible and necessary.

Conclusion

States spy, and they do not do so in a political, legal, and normative vacuum. This article has argued that intelligence is a social practice structured by three logics – survival, order, and humanity – and that these logics are in permanent tension. In practice, they tend toward a rough hierarchy: *raison d'état* is the default logic of intelligence, *raison de système* is its societal counterpart oriented toward rule-governed coexistence, and *raison d'humanité* is its most demanding possibility. Whether intelligence serves survival, order, or humanity depends not on any hidden natural law of IR but on what states decide to do with the practice. My critique has been that IR theory has not accounted for it.

Hobbesian realism, the tradition supposedly best positioned to theorize intelligence, is also the tradition most constitutionally incapable of doing so. Across its many variants – structural, offensive, defensive, neoclassical, classical – the realism impasse, as I call it, is all the same. A body of IR theorization organized around material power, international anarchy, and state survival cannot ask what norms govern intelligence practice, what role secrecy plays in sustaining international order, or under what conditions intelligence serves justice rather than power alone. Realist IR theory's inability to theorize intelligence beyond a narrow *raison d'état* is not a gap to be filled within the many realisms. It is, rather, a strong signal that a different theoretical framework is required.

[109]Schuett and Williams 2024, 226.
[110]Parrat 2017.

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Grotian rationalism in the form of the ES can provide that IR theory framework. Intelligence, theorized through the societal approach, is not merely a realist instrument that states deploy within the international system but a practice through which international society constitutes and reproduces itself. The extension of *raison de système* theorization to intelligence reveals an ordering logic that realism cannot reach. States do invest in the shared rules and tacit codes of intelligence conduct because systemic stability and societal order depend on it. The three-position framework developed here – from intelligence as the shadow of diplomacy (minimalist position) to intelligence and diplomacy as two faces of a single ordering coin (maximalist position) – establishes that any account of diplomacy as a primary institution is theoretically incomplete without a corresponding account of intelligence. And an emerging *lex specialis* supplies the legal dimension in a properly Grotian sense: Where there is international society, there is law, and intelligence is generating its own.

However, Grotian rationalist ES theorization does not exhaust the subject. The notion of *raison d'humanité* names a third logic, which is that intelligence is – and can be – in the service of humanity rather than any particular state. In that sense, a Kantian revolutionist or solidarist IR theory is equipped to theorize intelligence in a way that no other tradition can. The tension between that logic and the survival and order imperatives that dominate intelligence practice is its analytical and methodological core. Critical approaches deepen the account by naming its blind spots – Whose survival? Whose order? Whose humanity? – and the resulting friction between ES theorization and such critique is productive and necessary. It will sharpen both theoretical and policy debates by sharpening intelligence as an institutional object.

That object, sharpened, raises a question for further research. A practice that predates the modern state system, has generated secondary institutions across every major political order, has been internalized within states as a structural principle of governance, and upon whose continuous functioning diplomacy, war, and international law all depend in different ways, is not a practice at the margins of international society and therefore it cannot be a practice at the margins of ES theorization. Rather, intelligence is a candidate for its center. Whether espionage qualifies as a primary institution requires the kind of sustained historical and comparative inquiry that this article has not undertaken. What this article has done is establish the theoretical conditions under which that inquiry becomes possible, and it has created the normative space to judge intelligence practices: because where there are spies, there is society.

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