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The Role of Special Intelligence Operations in Enhancing the Strategic Influence of Small States: The Case of Cyprus

Peratikos, Panagiotis

Assistant in International Relations, Strategy and Security, School of Social
Humanities, Neapolis University Pafos

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PANAGIOTIS PERATIKOS

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Student Name: Panagiotis Peratikos

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Examination Committee:

First Supervisor (Neapolis University Pafos).....[name, rank, signature]

Member of the Examination Committee:[name, rank, signature]

Member of the Examination Committee:[name, rank, signature]

Abstract

This dissertation examines how the perceived intensity of Special Intelligence Operations (SIOs) contributes to the perceived strategic influence of small states, using Cyprus as an empirical case study. In contemporary international relations, intelligence has evolved from a purely supportive function into a central instrument of statecraft, particularly under conditions characterised by hybrid threats, strategic ambiguity, and informational competition. For small states facing structural constraints in conventional military power, intelligence capabilities—and crucially, perceptions of those capabilities—may function as a strategic force multiplier, enhancing credibility, deterrence, and perceived relevance within a contested security environment.

The study adopts a perception-centred analytical framework grounded in intelligence studies, small-state theory, and deterrence literature. It advances the argument that intelligence-driven strategic influence is mediated less by observable operational outcomes and more by interpretive mechanisms shaped by information asymmetries, signalling dynamics, and audience beliefs. Specifically, the dissertation investigates whether perceived intelligence intensity directly influences perceptions of Cyprus's strategic influence, and whether this relationship is mediated through perceived information advantage and deterrence-related perception effects. It further explores how alliance beliefs, perceived threat levels, respondent knowledge, and professional background condition these perceptions.

Methodologically, the research employs a descriptive quantitative survey design. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to two analytically distinct respondent groups: military personnel and university students residing in Cyprus. This comparative approach enables an assessment of how perceptions vary according to professional proximity to the security sector and levels of threat awareness. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including measures of central tendency and dispersion, allowing for systematic comparison across constructs and respondent groups.

The findings indicate that respondents generally associate higher perceived intelligence intensity with stronger perceptions of Cyprus's strategic influence. This relationship appears to operate primarily through indirect pathways, particularly perceived information advantage and deterrence-by-uncertainty effects. Intelligence is thus interpreted not only as an operational capability but as a symbolic and psychological asset that enhances strategic credibility under conditions of uncertainty. Notably, military respondents consistently report stronger assessments of intelligence activity and strategic influence than student respondents, suggesting that professional exposure and threat sensitivity shape interpretive frameworks.

The dissertation contributes to intelligence and small-state scholarship by providing empirical insight into perception-driven mechanisms of strategic influence in a small-state context. It offers policy-relevant implications for Cyprus, highlighting the strategic value of intelligence capabilities, alliance integration, and perception management in strengthening national resilience and strategic relevance in the Eastern Mediterranean security environment.

Keywords:

Special Intelligence Operations; Strategic Influence; Small States; Intelligence Perception; Information Advantage; Deterrence; Cyprus; Intelligence Studies; Hybrid Threats; Alliance Perceptions