Bias and Perception: How it Affects Our Judgment in Decision Making and Analysis

By Aries B. Rebugio

Abstract

Since the inception of the intelligence discipline, there have always been problems associated with the collection and analysis of information. Several of these problems occur because the human mind is easily influenced by internal and external factors. Biases and perceptions can lead to a misconstrued view of reality and the way we process information. In the case of the Cold War, these factors contributed to challenges and failures in intelligence. The primary research question is to find out how do bias and perception affect our judgment? This paper will seek to answer the research question by looking at the intelligence failures and the causes for those failures during the Cold War.

The purpose of this case study is to allow the reader to better understand the factors that ultimately led to errors in analysis by the US Intelligence Community (IC). In doing so, the reader can be better aware of errors that can be prevented in the future and ultimately lead to better intelligence analysis. The study site of research was the event of the Cold War including the actual engagements that occurred. The primary players in this study were members of the intelligence community.

Due to the different countries of interests during the Cold War, United States policymakers and intelligence analysts held varying degrees of bias and perception towards the adversaries. However, this research has shown that the phenomenon of the rational actor theory, Western perception, risk aversion, underestimating the enemy, politicized intelligence, and image theory was all evident throughout this multiple-case study.

At the outset of this research, the focus was to see how bias and perception affects intelligence analysis. However, the findings have shown that the decision makers are also affected. When you combine the negative effects of bias and perception on both ends of the relationship, the error in judgment is compounded and makes for a dangerous outcome; thus leading to inevitable intelligence failure.

Introduction

Since the inception of the intelligence discipline, there have always been problems associated with the collection and analysis of information. Several of these problems occur because the human mind is easily influenced by internal and external factors. Biases and perceptions can lead to a misconstrued view of reality and the way we process information. In the case of the Cold War, these factors contributed to challenges and failures in intelligence. The primary research question is to find out how do bias and
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**Literature Review**

The article The “motivated bias” Dilemma in Warfare and Intelligence aims to explain how rational thinking affects the behavior of individuals and groups who are a part of organizations that deal primarily with national security; organizations such as the intelligence community and the military.2 Matthew Wahlert demonstrates multiple examples of motivated bias as an explanation throughout history as the root of intelligence and policy failure.

A research was conducted regarding motivational bias and its effects on international crisis, the outcome was surprisingly high. Wahlert quotes, “An analysis of twentieth century international crises found that 79% of the cases studied showed evidence of a failure to reconsider previously rejected alternatives … Almost half — 47% — of the crises revealed that decisions-makers had failed to establish detailed strategies to implement, monitor, or alter their chosen policies.”2 Wahlert’s study shows that being unable or unwilling to change previously established policies appears to be one of the biggest downfalls of decision makers. It would be interesting to hear the explanation for how or why the other 53% of the decision makers were able to change their previous policies.

The author claims motivated bias as the primary reason for why decision makers are hesitant to change their original statements on policies, which ultimately leads to poor decision making,

> The motivational explanation goes something like this – the intelligence information should have suggested that decision makers consider a certain alternative but the decision makers freeze previous images and remain path-dependent, which precludes the consideration of such alternatives. Motivationally, policy makers manage to minimize data that do not conform to the accepted narrative.2

Although there is overwhelmingly substantiating evidence of how motivated bias contributes to decision making, the author could have posed an alternate reason.

The paper Intelligence Analysis is written by William E. Odom for the “Intelligence and National Security” journal. Odom’s purpose is to clarify three topics within intelligence analysis that he feels has caused a subject of confusion. First, he defines what the scopes of responsibilities are within the intelligence analyst. Second, how evolving technology has affected intelligence collection and analysis. Third, the author identifies the limits of the intelligence analyst and suggestions on how to improve the
production of better intelligence. Only the topics relevant to this study will be covered.

Odom makes a good case defining the intelligence analysts role by highlighting the following events after the 9/11 attacks. The author quotes a senator stating, “[W]e must have intelligence that does not allow the president to make wrong decisions about going to war.” By highlighting this unfortunate statement by a senator, the author reminds the audience that it is not or has it ever been the intelligence analyst’s job to provide decision makers a “one option” course of action. If that were the case then their sole reason for existence as policy and decision makers would be irrelevant. An analyst’s job, and the intelligence community as a whole, is to inform and shape policy; not to decide on them.

Historical examples are given in this paper where pressure, in this case, from higher authority has caused intelligence to conform to the position of power. In his paper the author quotes, “The overpowering status and authority of the commander … inevitably causes the intelligence officer to make analytical judgments more or less in line with what the commander will accept, what he believes is reasonable and prudent.” This supports my theory on how political pressure can lead to biased intelligence. This is a dangerous occurrence that has cost thousands of American lives. The author does pose the question of whether there are any instances where the intelligence officer has had any success in persuading the decision maker to change his mind from their original biased perception of a situation. Most certainly these instances have occurred yet the author does not cover any specifics.

Odom makes the argument that some degree of bias and perception is inevitable and all a person can do is to mitigate it as best as one can. A way to mitigate bias and perception is by allowing one’s self the availability to multiple sources of information. Moreover, one needs to divulge from looking at things as “black and white” because most things are never that simple. Odom claims that the US Army and politicians had a propensity to simplify the recent wars in the Middle East as such:

For example, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, if the Army limits its intelligence interest to contemporary Iraq and its military capabilities, which it apparently did, then it is bound to fail to anticipate the ethnic fragmentation … they [US commanders] needed to know the country’s political history and the rigidities of its political culture, going back to even to Ottoman times … They also needed to know the politics of various sects within the Islamic faith. Obviously these are the same things that senior political leaders in Washington also needed to know.

The decision makers during the Cold War were also guilty of seeing the situation through a simple set of lens. By seeing the war as “black and white”, this led the decision makers to form a negative perception of both the North and South Vietnamese. If they had a better understanding about the Vietnamese people and their culture, their negative bias and perception could have been mitigated. This would have allowed them to gain a better perspective of their area of operations which leads to better decision making.

The author provides a good solution that can help mitigate intelligence analysis failures. Odom suggests analysts need to have a good understanding of the constraints amongst political and military decision makers. Analysts need to understand how the systems and processes work within the political and military system. By doing so, they can better prepare their analysis and present the information to the decision makers that allow them to choose from reduced uncertainties.

The author seems to take a pragmatic view that bias is inevitable and that it will always be present in intelligence analysis. However, the author never really states his thoughts on why it is inevitable other than it being human nature. Is there really more to bias than just being an innate trait? Thus far, this gap still remains as to why bias is inevitable. Although the paper never mentions Odom’s background, it appears that he is certainly biased against the policy and decision makers.
In the paper *Error, Folly, and Policy Intelligence* the author discusses three main points that lead to poor policy and decision making. John Stempel states, “First, erroneous or misleading information has been developed. Second, the analysis used to prepare information for use by others has been flawed, producing poor advice … Third, at key junctures of history, error has been compounded by persistence over time, thus producing ‘folly.’” The author claims the basis of errors begins at the individual level.

For rational decision making, it would make sense for the individual to gather as much information about a situation prior to making a judgment call. According to Stempel, rational choice theorists do the exact opposite. They only see the situation from their own biases.

There are other explanations for what leads to errors in decision making. Stempel offers the idea of the person’s ego getting in the way and the position they hold, how people let it get the best of them. The other explanation is an individual’s complete arrogance of a situation allows them to make poor decisions based on lack of knowledge. When one compounds arrogance with stubbornness the path to ill decision making is inevitable. Even if given all the facts and information, decision makers will maintain their stance based on irrational thinking.

The author’s overall recommendation for individuals charged with the responsibility of making important decisions and policy is to practice humility. A person with humility makes little room for arrogance and stubbornness. It would do away, not completely, with the tendency to ignore warning signs that may contradict with what policy makers believe based on loose facts and information.

**Methodology**

The strategy to be used in this research will be a case study while utilizing the multiple-case study design. The purpose of this multiple-case study is to understand how bias and perception affects our judgment with regards to intelligence during the Cold War. This descriptive design is restricted within the confines of history. The multiple-case study design will be used in order to replicate the end result in each study. A *case study* is defined by Bromley as, “a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest.” The events in this case will be the Cold War and the phenomenon of interest is how bias and perception affect decision making. A case study strategy is appropriate for this research because we will be observing a specific phenomenon in a given period of time.

Due to my past experiences from serving in the military, I have seen on multiple occasions when bias and perception has affected the decision making process. What my experience brings is the similar relationship between the superior and the subordinate. The term leader and commander will be used interchangeably. Leader is defined as, “a person who directs a military force or unit … a person who has commanding authority or influence”. Commander is defined as, “one in an official position of command or control”. Although I have not had experience working directly with policy and other decision makers of the like, a comparison can be made to military commanders. Commanders are ultimately responsible for making decisions in both garrison and combat environment. Like policy makers, they too are subject to bias and perception. Since I have seen and/or experienced firsthand how these factors play into decision making, this gives me a better understanding of the effects of bias and perception. The first three years of my military experience consisted of holding relatively junior officer positions: rifle platoon leader, assistant operations officer, headquarters company executive officer, and a couple of months as acting company commander. All of those positions required reporting information of some sort to a superior officer which means my biased experience relates more to the subordinate intelligence officer/analyst.

Since I am in the military, my view is also somewhat biased against policy makers who make decisions
that ultimately affect the lives of the men and women in uniform. The Prussian military officer Carl von Clausewitz once said that “War is a mere continuation of policy by other means.” As true as that statement is, Soldiers, sailors, marines, and air men should not be utilized as pawns in a global game of chess for the benefit or mistakes of politicians. With that being said, I will try my best to look at the findings objectively without incorporating my own bias.

The setting of this study will be conducted primarily in an office and personal room location due to the restrictions imposed by currently residing in a combat zone. The persons under study will be the policy and decision makers who either resided stateside or overseas. This also includes the military commanders in charge or held a position of authority and influence regarding the different events. The others under study will be the subordinate intelligence analysts and officers involved in providing the information and intelligence to the policy and decision makers. Due to environmental constraints previously mentioned, there will not be any direct interaction with the actors involved in the study. Therefore, there is minimal ethical consideration since all the actors to be studied will be solely from documents collected.

Analysis of Findings

In the paper *Sins of Omission and Commission*, Matthew Aid discusses how the “rational actor theory” plays a role in intelligence analysis. Through my research, I’ve come to find that the rational actor theory seems to be a problem that constantly arises during analysis and decision making. The rational actor theory is defined by Aid as when, “individuals and organizations naturally choose the most rational and logical course of action based upon observable conditions, environment, and constraints.”

Take for example the Chinese intervention during the Korean War. Despite multiple reporting from several intelligence sources that the Chinese would indeed involve themselves in the Korean War, the US analysts refused to believe it. This Korean War intervention completely surprised the US because they did not think it was a rational action by the Chinese.

The other problem regarding judgment in analysis and decision making is viewing the issue from a Western perspective. To an American, intervening in the Korean War was irrational but from the Chinese perspective, it was obviously a rational move. Analysts and decision makers need to stray away from viewing problems from an American perspective. The only time this is beneficial, and still not always applicable, is when dealing with internal American problems. In the profession of intelligence and foreign policy, we must constantly view the issues from our allies and adversaries mind.

In John Hedley’s paper *Learning from Intelligence Failures*, the concept of the rational actor once again arises in my research. Hedley concludes that the mistake of analysts and decision makers to rely on a rational actor contributed to the intelligence failures of the Cold War.

In September 19, 1962 a prominent intelligence analyst within the IC, Sherman Kent, predicted that it was unlikely for the Soviets to send nuclear missiles across the Atlantic and into Cuba. Shortly a month after, based on Imagery Intelligence (IMINT), he was without a doubt proven wrong. How could someone of such highly regarded analytical skills be so wrong in his prediction? Sherman Kent and his colleagues had predicted Nikita Khrushchev to be a rational actor. Through Kent’s perspective, it would be irrational for the Soviets to do such an act. Therefore this led Kent to predict the only rational move for Khrushchev was to maintain the missiles in Russia. The problem with this perception is that the human mind can be very unpredictable. Kent and his colleagues further obscured the predicament by viewing it solely from an American perspective. As previously discussed in Matthew Aid’s paper, viewing issues from an American perspective tends to be an underlying issue within analysts and decision makers.
In the early 1980s, the IC conducted a study of twelve events that at a minimum resulted in unfavorable outcomes for the United States. This study covered the significant events that occurred from the roughly previous twenty years. The study identified that the single most point of failure within the community was the practice of “risk aversion”. Analysts had the proclivity to establish and maintain the consensus of thought and did very little in terms of challenging the status quo. Once established, any new information that came available was marginalized in order to “play it safe”. This also led to a single path of thinking; therefore any challenging analysis fell off the wayside. This is detrimental to the process of analysis and prediction because it allows for only one outcome. A primary purpose for conducting predictions is to forecast multiple outcomes in order for analysts to determine the variables and to inform the decision makers on the presented options.

In the essay *Hanoi’s Strategic Surprise, 1964-1965*, Mark Moyar claims how bias and perception led the US intelligence analysts to underestimate the Viet Cong (VC). Moyar summarizes a US intelligence document stating, “... Both Hanoi and Peiping are almost certainly anxious not to become involved in the kind of war in which the great weight of superior US weaponry might be brought to bear against them, and they almost certainly feel – under present circumstances at least – that they will not have to initiate actions carrying great risk of such US response in order to win the day in time.” With this kind of perception of the VC within the US intelligence community, it is no wonder how their judgment led to errors. This perception was most likely shared amongst the policy makers back in Washington. History has shown that Americans have repeatedly underestimated their enemies, especially when the adversaries were seen as inferior and unintelligent people. However, when actually engaged on the battle field, the Native Americans, the Japanese, the Vietnamese, and Iraqis, just to name a few have all proven to be anything but an “easy victory”.

It could be argued that the interaction between the policymakers and intelligence community during the Cold War was a foreshadowing of how the events would unfold regarding Iraq WMDs in 2002 to 2003. The policymakers of the Cold War put such political pressure on the intelligence analysts that eventually they succumbed. Instead of creating policy based off intelligence, the men in Washington made the intelligence fit their policies; in other words “politicized intelligence”. Politicians, not all, are unfortunately known for creating the façade of doing things for the “good of the people” when in reality, they shape policies that promote their self-interests. In the essay *Vietnam: Lessons for Intelligence in Wartime*, Nancy Bird states, “[e]ven if strategic intelligence analysts are successfully able to formulate honest, objective wartime assessments, they are inevitably up against a wall of strong opinions by policymakers who have political considerations beyond the scope of intelligence bureaucrats.” Unfortunately, in situations such as this even the best analysts with the best intentions cannot get beyond the political “road block” emplaced by the self-serving politicians. In the case of the Cold War, good and unbiased analysis never truly came to fruition due to the fostering of an environment that suppressed countering views imposed by the politicians.

In a book called *Introduction to Political Psychology*, the “image theory” is applicable in explaining the decisions made by policy makers during the Cold War. *Image theory* according to M.L. Cottam, et al. is “a political psychological approach that draws connections between policymakers’ image of other countries and their resulting behavior.” What this means is that policymakers tend to base their actions and policies depending on the characteristics of a certain country.

In the case of the Soviet Union, US policymakers categorized them in the image of the “enemy”. This means that the US viewed them as being culturally equal but also a military threat. The authors state the following regarding the enemy, “Some of the emotions associated with the enemy would include anger, frustration, envy, jealousy, fear, distrust, and possibly grudging respect. An enemy’s successes are
considered unfair, and when bad things happen and goals are not met, the enemy is blamed.” The emotions towards the enemy previously mentioned inevitably affected our policymakers and intelligence analysts’ bias and perception towards the Soviet Union.

History has shown that the US has viewed most Asian adversaries as inferior and unintelligent yet in fact it has been quite the exact opposite. During the Korean and Vietnam War, the US policymakers presumably perceived the adversaries with the “colonial image”. When the colonial image is applied to a country, they are usually seen as unintelligent, culturally and militarily inferior, ruled by a corrupt elite and regarded as being child like. In a paper titled US Intelligence and Vietnam, Michael Warner sums up the American perception of the Vietnamese, “Many South Vietnamese leaders, moreover, were seen by the Americans as either corrupt, incompetent, or working for their own purposes, whether ethnic, religious, or ideological.” If this was the perception of Americans regarding their ally, then most likely the VC was viewed even worse.

Conclusion

Due to the different countries of interests during the Cold War, United States policymakers and intelligence analysts held varying degrees of bias and perception towards the adversaries. However, my research has shown that the phenomenon of the rational actor theory, Western perception, risk aversion, underestimating the enemy, politicized intelligence, and image theory was all evident throughout this multiple-case study. A suggestion for mitigating the aforementioned phenomenon would be to foster an environment that encourages analysts to go against the status quo, to state what others do not want to hear, to have the courage to say what needs to be heard. However, they should not be unsubstantiated counter arguments but rather with sound unbiased evidence that presents the contrary. For a change to properly take effect, it would entail a paradigm shift that urgently needs to occur within the intelligence community. This paradigm shift needs to not only occur within the IC but also with policy makers. How do we as a subculture — all concerned with national security — emplace a change within decision makers to see the negative effects of self interest? Are we the ones to be held accountable for policing our colleagues? If this paradigm shift were to occur it would most likely take a generation of change within the educational institutions and the socio-cultural relationship between decision maker and analyst. However, it is better to make the shift sooner than later.

What are other possible factors that affect bias and perception? Close mindedness can also be a relating factor that leads to bias and judgment in intelligence analysis and decision making. The inability or unwillingness to accept contradicting information from one’s established belief is a dangerous flaw to have. If humans were unwilling to hear new information or different ideas, modern society as a whole today would be very different. Most likely we would be several hundred years behind our current state due to the inability to progress in thought.

It is not unreasonable, although not right, for people of such high status in society to become hubristic. Hubris is defined as “the exaggerated pride or self-confidence”. How does hubris play a role in influencing a person’s, specifically decision maker, thoughts and actions? One could argue that due to their elevated positions in society, the decision makers feel over confident in their actions and therefore suppress the thought that they could possibly be wrong. Since the decision makers have such high pride, they also do not want to be seen as going back on their word. This leads them to marginalize any conflicting information that may contradict their previously held beliefs and policies. Politicians tend to stray away from back peddling from their statements. One could presume politicians would rather be wrong and unwavering in their thoughts and actions, than be right but seen as weak or indecisive.
Although this topic of hubris was not necessarily sought after in my research, it was also not contained in any of the documents studied. Therefore, the knowledge on this phenomenon and how it links to decision making could be a subject of future study.

At the outset of this research, the focus was to see how bias and perception affects intelligence analysis. However, the findings have shown that the decision makers are also affected. When you combine the negative effects of bias and perception on both ends of the relationship, the error in judgment is compounded and makes for a dangerous outcome; thus leading to inevitable intelligence failure.

Aries B. Rebugio is a Psychological Operations officer currently deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He is serving in the capacity of conducting operational and strategic level Military Information Support Operations (MISO). This research paper has been modified from the initial version written for a graduate level course titled Analytics II. The views expressed in this article are strictly those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Psychological Operations branch, United States Army, or the Department of Defense.

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