CAN WE IMPROVE INTELLIGENCE AGAINST TERROR THREATS?

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

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'The study of intelligence failures is perhaps the most academically advanced field in the study of intelligence', according to Woodrow Kuhns. This is true: much has been written dissecting the reasons behind various foreign policy and military disasters that have been subscribed to faulty intelligence.

The whole post-9/11 era has brought the issue of intelligence failure in their relation to threats from groups that engage in terrorism into ever sharper focus:

- Congressional committees have blamed the intelligence community for failing to anticipate the scale of the terrorist threat leading up to 9/11, and afterwards for failing to ascertain the scope of Iraqi WMD prior to invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies.

- Likewise, in the UK, for example, the bombing attacks of 7 July 2005 were seen to reside in the failure of the intelligence services to discern the level of the threat: in fact in a matter of weeks before these attacks, the joint intelligence assessment committee declared there was little threat to speak of… clearly a faulty diagnosis.

The definition of intelligence is 'knowledge gathered for a purpose' that is designed to reduce uncertainty. As Sir David Omand states and 'secret intelligence achieves this objective in respect of information that others wish to

remain hidden. Thus stated, the purpose of intelligence is not linked simply to knowledge for its own sake but to organise information that can be put to use.'

Intelligence failures are, obviously, failures to attain appropriate knowledge, and/or faulty analysis that lead to misdirected actions, or lack of timely or appropriate action. Plainly, with the potential for further devastating attacks by groups such as those linked to al Qaeda, reveal the possible costs of intelligence failure to be high. Given past intelligence failures in forecasting or preventing such attacks, is there anything we can learn from past failures to improve our chances of success? It would be foolish to believe that one can perfect our procedures to completely eliminate risk. No one can predict the future with certainty... if we could, we would have no need for intelligence services.

So, where do we begin in looking for possible answers that might help achieve improvements?

In considering intelligence failures, the traditional focus in academic studies is on the institutions and processes of intelligence as the source and cause of those failures, and as Kuhns suggests, vast tracts have been written on the subject.

But as Richard Russell has argued, the problem is that 'too much of the growing body of literature on intelligence restricts itself to the inside workings of the intelligence process as if intelligence was an end in and of itself…'

Indeed, I think this is an accurate statement, and that looking for the source of failure only in the workings of what we understand as the intelligence world misses something profound about the nature of intelligence failure, which I think to a greater degree resides outside the immediate confines of intelligence structures, institutions and processes.

Public perceptions tend to view intelligence agencies as independent research institutes charged with forecasting future political events and providing accurate advice to policy makers. In reality, intelligence organizations can never aspire to

the ideal of an autonomous institution freely purveying objective information and assessment to politicians.

However, intelligence agencies reflect national priorities, and in democratic states, especially, they will invariably exhibit all the characteristics that mould a particular culture and civilization.

In this respect, intelligence agencies often mirror their own societies and this is the context that I wish to suggest one should ultimately understand intelligence failures

Principally, the missing link in understanding failures of intelligence resides in an idea that I want to introduce to you as 'Discourse Failure': the constriction of language and vocabulary to identify, analyze, and accept that certain kinds of threat actually exist.

WHAT ARE INTELLIGENCE FAILURES?

Before discussing the concept of discourse failure further, I want to impose some clarity and structure about what we are talking about: primarily, I want to be clear what we mean by intelligence failures.

Fundamentally, intelligence failures refer to WARNING FAILURES: that is, the failure to foresee and react to events that, in hindsight at least, we believe people should have done.

There are 4 types of warning failure:

1) SURPRISE ATTACK: the most graphic form of failure – the failure to predict a significant military assault. Examples are legion: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941; North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950; Israel's failure to foresee Egypt and Syria's attack in the Yom Kippur War of 1973; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the terror assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001.

2) DIPLOMATIC SURPRISE: less prominent form of intelligence failure, but another level of surprise: the failure to predict important political events that have significant consequences for one's interests. Potent examples here are often the failures to anticipate regime changes such as fall of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979.

3) LONG TERM INTENTION FAILURES AND MISJUDGEMENTS: longer term misreading and inaccurate diagnosis of issues that lead to faulty assessments and policies. Here we might cite examples such as the US's over estimate of Soviet strategic bomber forces in the 1950s leading to erroneous ideas like the 'bomber gap'. Alternatively, the underestimate of Soviet intermediate range ballistic nuclear forces in Europe in the 1970s. Perhaps, a more telling illustration would be the failure during Cold War to appreciate the Soviet conception of détente in 1960s and 70s – which was one of peace and struggle, not peace and good will, which caused Western policy to have an excessively benign view, and which in itself led to forms of diplomatic and military surprise such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Another example here would be the failure to anticipate the consequences of the implosion of the Soviet economy that led to the demise of the USSR along with the East European communist bloc and the end of the Cold War, which took many analysts by surprise.

4) OPERATIONAL FAILURES RESULTING FROM FAULTY INTELLIGENCE: a final level of intelligence failure can be seen as the failure of plans based on information that turns out to be flawed. Again, examples here are varied, but we might highlight an action like the failure of the Israeli intelligence services' to target the individual they thought was responsible for the Munich Olympic massacre in 1972, instead killing a completely innocent Moroccan waiter in Lillehammer in 1974 (?).

WHY ARE INTELLIGENCE FAILURES SO HARD TO ASSESS?

So, we might be able to identify the forms intelligence failure often take, but trying to analyse what are the causes of intelligence failure is highly problematic, due to 5 factors, which make assessing intelligence failure so difficult.

1. The first difficulty relates to the fact that intelligence is an elusive phenomenon: it is about finding out what you don't know. Almost by definition, therefore, failures will happen due to deficient forms of information and interpretation because no earthly being or organization is omniscient: no such thing as an all-knowing organization, that's why you need an intelligence organization in the first place.

- The point is that you don't necessarily know what you are looking for, even if you think you do. For example, the fall of Crete to the Germans in 1941 was not due to any failure of knowledge about German intentions: the British knew the Germans were planning a parachute drop to capture the islands and prepared a logical defence accordingly. But no one, not even the Germans, envisaged how crucial the capture of certain key airfields would be to the fall of the island: intelligence, no matter how good, could have anticipated this.

2. Secondly, the difficulty of discerning the causes of failure resides in the fact that as a phenomenon intelligence is reciprocal in nature: one person's warning failure is another person's successful strategic surprise.

- To discover something in terms of useful intelligence, you don't just have to discern what is valuable information from a mass of data and often well-kept secrets but you have to battle a host of other things that are deliberately designed to mislead you.

- Thus, intelligence 'failure' may not really be a failure of your own intelligence processes so much, but more a mark of a successful deception campaign by the other side. Eg. The Japanese success at

hiding their aircraft carriers before Pearl Harbor through radio silence; or the successful allied deception operations (dummy radio traffic, bogus build up of forces in southern England) before the D-Day landings in June 1944, which deflected German intelligence away from the idea that the invasion would come through Normandy, instead convincing the Germans that the invasion would come towards the Pas de Calais, and possibly with a diversionary raid into Norway, compelling the Germans to retain their divisions there instead of reinforcing the channel areas.

3. Thirdly, we have a level of analysis problem: the fact is that causes of intelligence failures are likely to be infinitely divisible.

- Where do you look for the source of failure? It may start at the top with shortcomings in decision making and management, and then you can work your way down the chain: failures of interpretation, failure to communicate important information, failure to gather appropriate information and so on and so on. You can carry on dividing right down to the level of the individual: does intelligence failure, for instance, result in poor recruiting procedures of agents or analysts; are they badly trained, overworked, mismanaged etc etc.

- In other words, the causes of failure are potentially in everything: the debate over causality in history is a huge topic in the humanities and social sciences but we can see this manifesting itself very acutely in the diagnostics of intelligence failures.

- Where are the causes of intelligence failure? Answer: it depends where you want to look.

4. Fourthly, and flowing from the previous point, is that failures are inherent in any organisation and social collective. Most organisations succeed more or less in doing what they need to do but they are all prone to weakness and mistakes. Bureaucracies by their nature are always half way incompetent. Why should we expect intelligence institutions to be

any different? Michael Herman correctly sums up the issue when he states:

> 'All professions attract criticisms when they slip on banana-skins. But errors in weather forecasting do not call meteorology into question, and the persistent forecasting failures over the British economy only lead to the employment of more economists. A first question is therefore whether there is really anything special about intelligence failures?'

- The answer is, surely, that there is nothing special about intelligence failures – it is just that when they do happen their impact can be more dramatic than other kinds of failures.

5. Overall, all these factors establish an overarching fifth point, which is what exactly constitutes intelligence failure anyway? Often cited examples of intelligence failure are, arguably, caused more by so-called political failures or failures of command rather than the failure to provide the necessary information. May be all the necessary warnings were detected, all the raw data gathered and accurately assessed, but either not acted upon or misinterpreted, or delayed by political or bureaucratic blockages, procrastination and obfuscation.

- Stalin ignored 84 separate warnings of the impending German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

- President Johnson overlooked what turned out to be very accurate CIA assessments of the likely difficulties of getting the US embroiled on the ground in Vietnam.

- At Pearl Harbor, the Americans got wind of the Japanese attack, but this was conveyed so slowly down the chain of command that the telegram warning of imminent attack arrived when Japanese bombs were just about to fall.

- The fact is that intelligence merges with command and policy implementation, which makes identifying the roots in intelligence failure so difficult.

TRADITIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CAUSE OF INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

Overall, intelligence failures are likely to have multiple and complex causes: cf Schelling quote.

But what of the traditional explanations for failures of intelligence, which have, as Richard Russell observes has received so much attention in the literature.

There are essentially four levels of explanation that encompass most of the existing explanations for intelligence failure that can be briefly itemised:

1) *Collection Failure*: perhaps the most common idea that forms public perceptions of what intelligence failures represents: the failure to acquire the right kinds of information in time. Not looking in the right places, not having sufficient agents, or privileging the wrong kind of intelligence gathering. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks this was the level at which much criticism was directed at the intelligences services, which held that they paid too much attention to the wrong targets (old adversaries, like the former Soviet Union), concentrated too much on technical intelligence gathering of hard data rather than human intelligence, recruiting high calibre agents with appropriate language skills, all of which resulted in the failure to penetrate terrorist cells.

2) *Analytical Failure*: is an equally prominent explanation which encompasses all forms of misjudgment relating to the relevance and credibility of the raw information. Again, in the context of 9/11, it was alleged that none of the American agencies contemplated the possibility that aircraft might be used as missiles is frequently cited as one such failure to 'connect the dots'.

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3) *Political Failure*: occurs when all the necessary clues were picked up, but either they were ignored or action on them was delayed by political blockages and/or procrastination. We have given some examples earlier, such as Stalin's failure to heed numerous warnings about the impending German invasion of the Soviet Union, but it was also an allegation that was levelled at the Bush administration before 9/11 that indications that some dramatic attack was in the offing, but no action was taken.

4) *Communication Failure*: refers to the problems in conveying information between the different layers of the intelligence bureaucracy both vertically within one agency and horizontally as well between other intelligence agencies and other arms of government. Timely information may not be transmitted to those who need it and could take action until it is too late: it may encompass a key intelligence assessment that was held up in numerous committees, reluctance among agencies to share their insights and sources and so on. In the case of 9/11, the lack of cooperation between the different intelligence agencies, as well as, more specifically, the FBI's failure to pass on a field agent's reports about the flying school activities of Islamic radicals, are cited as examples of how communication within, as well as among, the intelligence agencies had become dysfunctional.

5) *Perception Failure*: related to various psychological phenomena such as the belief that the adversary is incapable of doing certain things because you cannot do them yourself (the 'wasn't invented here' syndrome), judging situations according to one's own preconceptions (mirror imaging), and the unwillingness to challenge conventional wisdom for fear of being seen as an outsider (groupthink). In the 9/11 context, this is said to have occurred vis-a-vis the intelligence community's longstanding resistance to the idea that terrorist sleeper cells had penetrated the United States.

AN INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING?

What is wrong with this picture? Is it a complete appreciation of the reasons and causes for intelligence failure?

These five reasons primarily locate failure within the narrow confines of intelligence institutions and processes and the governmental bureaucracy. But is this sufficient?

This conventional typology implies that you can find the source of many if not all foreign policy, diplomatic and military failure solely in the technical-managerial issues of formal intelligence structures. Correspondingly, it implies that if you can somehow fix the structures, get them to work as well as they can, then all these diplomatic and military surprises will be eliminated. But we know this is not true: that even if you have the most effective intelligence bureaucracy that slip ups will not occur from time to time.

We know from our appreciation of what Herman and others say that there will be a propensity for failures to occur: there is no such thing as a perfect intelligence system.

We know from an appreciation of the Clausewitzian concept of friction things can always go wrong: but Clausewitz's point was that friction is inherent in EVERYTHING, not just systems and structures: it is the very essence of social life.

Therefore, focusing purely on structures and systems for the source of intelligence failure is surely not the whole story. Is there something else we can point to?

Moreover, we can sense this if we consider the whole lead up to 9/11 – which as I have suggested many people regard as a serious failure of intelligence – as well as other assaults by Islamist radicals, such as those carried out in London in July 2005

If we look at what we think we understand of the performance of the intelligence services in the lead up to these events, then certainly we can say that there appears to have been a failure of imagination, a failure of certain technical means and of communication. But the point is the intelligence services were not ignorant of the threat. They had their fingers on certain key areas and individuals in the preceding years. How could this not be the case, after all certain facts were clear already: The asymmetric threat from non-state actors was not new; Islamist militancy was not new; the suicide bombing of US targets was not new.

What appears to be the case is that the intelligence services of some western states were not ignorant of the threat; but they did ignore the threat... or at least downplayed its true extent. Western intelligence agencies and policy makers tended to treat these assaults as individual,
largely unrelated incidents, rather than a concerted attempt by an increasingly sophisticated Islamist terror **internationale** to engineer a confrontation with the United States, its allies and forces of modernity more generally. There is sufficient evidence to build a case here.

- Policy makers were reluctant to believe the scale of the threat – Clinton initially refused to believe that attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 was the result of a bomb.

- Australian intelligence agency sponsored academic conference arranged before 9/11 objected to the inclusion of a panel on Islamist radicalism, fearing it was discriminatory.

- In the mid-1990s, the British Security Service, MI5, abolished its section of the middle-east.

- We mentioned earlier the JTAC report prior to the 7 July attacks saying there was no threat from Islamist terrorism.

- One of the most piquant examples after 9/11 was when British foreign secretary Jack Straw stopped off in Cairo to drum up support for the war

on terrorism only to be told by President Hosni Mubarak for Britain's refusal to extradite wanted Islamic militants to Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

These kinds of issues and facts before 9/11 I think help us to revise our understanding of the applicability of accepted explanations for intelligence failure.

The main weaknesses of the conventional explanations are that they presume intelligence to be produced and consumed in an intellectual vacuum. As Russell says, it is as if they consider the workings of the intelligence process as if intelligence was an end in and of itself, and just a technical exercise in accurate information gathering.

They ignore the fact that intelligence is a man-made product and that the individuals involved in its creation and interpretation are exposed not only to the internal machinations of their respective institutions but also to influences from society at large.

After all, member of the so-called intelligence community are not isolated from society: they are not just political leaders or intelligence workers: they are also members of the wider community; they talk not only to other professionals in the field, they have conversations with their families, neighbors, and friends; they do not read just intelligence reports, but also newspapers, television and magazines.

While it is impossible to quantify the impact of these external influences, it is safe to say that they contribute to what is commonly described as the ''mindset'' of those who are involved in the intelligence process, and when this adds up to a particular threat being ignored or downplayed as in the lead up to 9/11, we can perhaps the workings of another crucial dimension of intelligence failure: Discourse Failure.

If we accept that the dominant debates in a society play a role in shaping the mindset of political leaders and members of the intelligence community, then the discourse failure concept is a missing link in the current debate.

The prevailing strands of thinking in a society—especially if they have penetrated public discourse for many years—constitute an implicit intellectual framework against which ideas are formed and intelligence is evaluated. They represent the unspoken parameters of the intelligence process.

Consequently, if the dominant debates in a given society may systematically ignore evolving threats to a nation's security, this will create negative outcomes at all the stages of the intelligence cycle. At the collection level, the wrong targets will be chosen and resources will be directed into irrelevant areas. Among analysts, information relating to emerging threats will be considered of minor importance and analytical emphasis will be placed on issues that seem to be of higher priority. At the policy level, reports concerning the evolving threat will be dismissed, and agencies will be directed to carry out work in accordance with the parameters of the dominant debate.

Discourse failure is not a theoretical notion that exists only as a debating point, but had practical effects that crucially influenced decision making. In the case of 9/11 and its aftermath it explains how politicians came to obscure the nature of Islamist extremism in a way that inhibited proper threat perception before the growing peril. This, in turn, impacted upon the intelligence services' capability, restricting their room to maneuver and hampering their efforts to respond in a manner commensurate with the degree of danger.

The point I want to emphasis here is that intelligence services – especially in democratic societies – are, and arguably, can only be reflections of their own societies: they are part of the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times.

If we consider the social, political and intellectual atmosphere in the decade or so before September 2001 we can appreciate how the intelligence services were rendered susceptible to discourse failure.

This was a time when it became increasingly fashionable in politics and academia to de-emphasise threats in the international system. This was a time of post-Cold War optimism, up to a point, but it was also a time when many intellectuals believed that politics could be re-thought in novel and creative ways in a manner that would break free from the strictures of power politics and narrow state-based interests that had dominated much Cold War thinking.

In academia, it became very in vogue to assert that threat perceptions were merely discursive creations: they were not a response to the realities of fundamentally opposed interests but the artificial product of western "othering" that deliberately constructed enemies in order to sustain the fear of an external threat, which itself was necessary to maintain an existing system that upheld dominant systems of power both within states in a manner that excluded and marginalized the downtrodden, voiceless victims of global capitalism.

Evolving international theories suggested threats could be overcome through a process of 'desecuritization' which involved changing the discourse away from macho confrontation towards inclusive dialogue based on cultural sensitivity, multilateral cooperation, building regional identities that overcame state based competition, universal human rights etc.

Changing the discourse, it was held, would erode the negative, threat based impulses embodied in a 'realist' state-system, and would form the basis of a stable, peaceful and just international order.

All this may seem rather high-blown, even naïve scholarly idealism, but one should not underestimate the hold these kinds of ideas had over analysts and policy makers, for they informed much of the content of 'third way' thinking that came to dominate politics in both the United States and Europe, which held that a liberal end of history had delivered the world into an essentially post-ideological epoch where traditional clashes of interest and threat assessment was considered an anachronism.

It was in this atmosphere of 'ethical foreign policies', the pursuit of multilateralism, universal human rights abroad and multiculturalism at home that caused discourse failure before 9/11.

In other words, it was in this political and intellectual atmosphere that intelligence and police agencies had to operate, and which caused the seriousness of the a burgeoning Islamist terror network to be overlooked, if not discounted altogether.

It was against this background that an over accommodationist attitude was towards aspects of Islamist revivalism was promoted, with fears of Islamic fundamentalism being seen to the product of hysterical western over-reaction and threat mongering.

It was the refusal by politicians, and scholars, which had a knock on effect on the intelligence services – that caused awkward questions not to be asked and evolving threats left either unconfronted or poorly understood because society at large – the zeitgeist – held that the world was now in an ostensibly de-ideologies post-Cold War era, where such problems either did not apply or could be wished away in the belief that clashes of interest and threats didn't matter anymore.

It was in this atmosphere that informed the operating environment of the intelligence services, causing them to misdirect resources and misapprehend the evolving threat that was to culminate in 9/11 and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The overall point I want to establish here is not that one side of the political spectrum was guilty of misunderstanding the threat. If you examine the record you will find that ideological preferences do not afford any greater protection from the consequences of discourse failure.

If we are talking about 9/11 as an intelligence failure then in fact one finds that the early Bush administration suffered from an equal and opposite form of discourse failure that did not comprehend the nature of the evolving threat from al-Qaeda because the administration was convinced that terrorism was only the product of state-sponsorship: bad, evil, states like Iran, Iraq, Syria and North Korea, rather than self-radicalising, self-motivating, de-territorialised non-state actors.

The overarching issue I want to emphasise is that intelligence analysis, sound forecasting, and the provision of accurate advice to policy makers is affected by a wider set of factors that go much deeper than the technical or organizational deficiencies within the intelligence agencies gauged with evaluating future threats:

What we see as threats are, to an extent, informed by the ideas we have of the world around us, and this is likely to have a direct impact upon how resources are directed to deal with prospective contingencies. By turns, it will affect the priorities and internal bureaucratic structures of the intelligence apparatus. Inherent in this process will be the tendency towards discourse failure and the resultant mistakes in threat perceptions.

In the final analysis I have used the intelligence failure before 9/11 to suggest that the nature of this failure resides at least partly in this idea of DISCOURSE FAILURE: a failure of our language, of our political vocabulary and ideology across society at large, that in the post-Cold War context at least, conceived itself as inhabiting an essentially post-ideological world where material threats were held not to exist.

There were a few contrarians of course who disagreed with this prevailing consensus, but they were ignored and sidelined; the vast majority were happy to go along with the prevailing ethos.

The notion of discourse failure in this respect points up a paradoxical facet of intelligence to work as it may apply to all cases of warning failure – not just with regard to the whole 9/11 epoch.
Intelligence often trying to find out answers to things you want to know about.

But what if society at large doesn't want to find out certain things? It doesn't want to accept that there are certain kinds of threats. Well… you're not even going to understand that there is a question worth asking.

To reiterate: that wider societal influences will affect our political perceptions and the language – the discourse – in which we choose to understand and articulate them.

Discourse, in other words, frames the boundaries of what we perceive as 'useful knowledge', and this guides the questions that we want to ask about what is worth knowing… what isn't.

What the discussion of discourse failure thus illustrates is a fundamental point: intelligence agencies are invariably reflections of their own societies, therefore, the roots of intelligence failure are not really to be found in institutions, structures, systems or processes, but ultimately, in OURSELVES.

Zaragoza, 24th of november 2008