ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE IN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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I. INTELLIGENCE AND EARLY WARNING OF CRISIS

The Cuban missile crisis has, and continues to be the locus case of successful crisis management (Allison & Zelikow, 1999) and of the role of US intelligence in shaping the crisis. The evaluations of US intelligence performance in the crisis have usually focused on the failure to estimate the Soviet intent to deploy strategic missiles on Cuba. Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 85-3-62) issued on 19 Sept ’62 argued against Soviet deployment of missiles on Cuba because the risks involved were “incompatible with Soviet practice to date and with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it” (CIA History Staff, 1992). However, it was monitoring of the Soviet buildup on Cuba, especially the U-2 aerial reconnaissance, which confirmed the construction of ballistic missile sites at San Cristobal and precipitated a crisis. Declassified records now enable us to...
assess the support US intelligence provided to their policy makers during the crisis by monitoring the levels of Soviet buildup on Cuba and globally while also attempting to estimate Soviet reactions to possible US options against their missiles deployed on Cuba. Declassified records also enable us to follow US intelligence monitoring of the Soviet removal of their missiles from Cuba. In contrast, the opening up of the Soviet archives shows that Soviet intelligence were cut out of the Soviet decision making leading to their deployment of missiles on Cuba and during the crisis had no information on US options and response to this deployment of missiles on Cuba (Blight and Welch, 1998).

II. UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL CRISSES

The Cuban missile crisis confirms our conventional thinking of an international crisis as an unexpected and surprising turn of events that threatens the survival of the nation-state. Could the CIA have predicted Khrushchev’s intention to base offensive missiles in Cuba? Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62 indicates that the CIA did consider this prospect, but ruled it out. Was this another instance of intelligence failure to provide its policy makers early warning of possible war in an escalating international crisis? Twenty years earlier the different intelligence services failed to provide their service chiefs and national
leaders warning of the Japanese decision to go to war with the US. Strategic intelligence is, in our current understanding of international crises, expected to provide the policy maker the information which anticipates what the adversary is planning and so enable the policy maker to take appropriate pre-emptive action to avoid war. These desultory notes identify some of the reasons cited for intelligence’s failure to provide its policy makers with early warning of an international crisis that could erupt into war. If we accept that intelligence failures are inevitable, then should we resign ourselves to being surprised, or examine how to reframe our understanding of an international crisis and expectations of intelligence in the management of international crisis?

The start of an international crisis is to recognize that normal diplomatic relations has broken down and events are taking an unexpected and surprising turn of events, creating a crisis that has to be managed if war is to be avoided. Avoiding War is taken to be the fundamental goal of crisis management (George, 1991), and intelligence is expected to provide its policy makers the foreknowledge of events taking an unexpected turn of events leading to a crisis. For Kennedy the crisis over Soviet deployment of missiles erupted on 14 October when U-2 aerial photographs confirmed the construction of missiles sites on Cuba and undermined the Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62. Kennedy and his colleagues who had been assured by the Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62 were thus fundamentally surprised that Khrushchev would act so
irrationally against what they, the White House policy group, perceived to be Soviet national interests and clear US warnings of its interests. But for Khrushchev the crisis would be whether the US will discover the deployment of Soviet missiles before they had completed it and so present the US with a fait accompli. Apparently Khrushchev thought Kennedy would do nothing because the US was already vulnerable to Soviet intercontinental missiles and Soviet missiles in Cuba were therefore not a new or escalating threat. Further, Khrushchev may have assessed that the Soviet Union could withstand any diplomatic pressure form the young US President. Both Kennedy and Khrushchev thus perceived each other very differently.

The essence of any political crisis management is what sense the antagonists are making of their changing, possibly rapidly changing, environment, and how to respond to that changing environment. What are the motives of the other side in pursuing this course of action which has lead to a crisis? This understanding, especially the resolve of the other side in holding on to their intention, is key to formulation of a negotiation strategy for the settlement of the crisis (Lebow, 1981). However, the decisions we make for the resolution of a crisis depends not only upon what sense we make of the breakdown of normalcy, but also what kind of meanings and rationalizations we are making of the outbreak of the crisis for ourselves and our publics. Thus making sense of the complex financial structures underlying the ongoing 2008 financial crisis,
and how we are responding to it are linked to the meanings and rationalizations we are imputing to how and why we failed to anticipate the crisis. Kennedy’s team responses in the Cuban missile crisis were apparently in large part driven by how their decisions will be judged by history a decade or century later. As Neustadt and May (1986, 14) argued, Kennedy and his team were “thinking in time.”

III. WHY HAS INTELLIGENCE FAILED IN ANTICIPATING INTERNATIONAL CRISSES?

The expectations of intelligence in the management of a political crisis from the foregoing model of its cycle are then firstly, to provide the policy maker of the impending breakdown of normalcy and the outbreak of a crisis. Second, intelligence is expected to provide the policy maker during the crisis with a constant flow of estimates and assessments of the other side’s intentions and response to the changing environment. Third, these estimates and assessments are expected to provide the policy maker with an advantage in negotiating a settlement of the crisis.

The track record of intelligence in fulfilling these expectations in a crisis has been dismal. All the crises which escalated and erupted into war from before the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor that precipitate World War II in the Pacific, to the
ongoing war in Iraq have been attributed to intelligence failures of one kind or another. Prussia’s victory against Austria in the battle of Sadowa and on to World War I; the Russo-Japanese War in 1904; the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; the North Korean attack against South Korea in June 1950, and Chinese intervention in the conflict; the Suez War of 1956; the Indo-Chinese War of 1962; crisis and surprise in three Arab-Israeli Wars; the Argentinean invasion of the Falklands; the current and 1991 campaigns against Iraq were all military surprises that have been to a large part been attributed to intelligence failure to anticipate the incentives and opportunities for a surprise attack in a political crisis (Knorr & Morgan, 1983). In this dismal record the Cuban Missile Crisis and the earlier Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948-49 and possibly, the Sino-Soviet border crisis of 1969 stand out as cases of successful crisis management which did not lead to war.

The consequent post-mortems and studies of why intelligence failed to provide their policy makers the foresight and understanding to avoid war in a crisis fills several meters of library shelf space. Broadly, four categories of failures have been identified. The first category of failures is institutional, focusing on failures in the organization of the intelligence services. This has been the finding of most Commissions of Inquiry from the Congressional Hearings into Pearl Harbor in 39 volumes to the Agranat Commission on failures in Israeli intelligence leading to Israel being surprised in 1973 and most recently, *The 9/11 Commission Report* calling for reform of not only the intelligence
community, but the entire government. The challenge in
reforming the intelligence services is the delicate check on over
centralisation and balance with decentralization and pluralism
(Betts, 2007, 124-158).

The second category of failures is the inability of intelligence
to see through the fog of deception issued by the adversary in a
crisis about their intentions and to penetrate the efforts of the
adversary to cover and conceal his movements to deny the
other side information of its plans. The Soviets successfully
covered and concealed much of their shipment of their missiles
to Cuba. Barton Whaley (2007) pioneered the study of
stratagems employed by adversaries in a crisis to deceive and
surprise their adversary for a strategic advantage. Whaley’s 1973
study of the known warnings of the German invasion of Russia
in 1941 is significant for how the German and Allied intelligence
services read very different interpretations into these warnings.
The lesson that intelligence services then draw is that Deception
and Denial by the adversary of their intentions and actions are a
major obstacle they are up against in their efforts to provide
better assessments and estimates to their policy makers. But to
what extent is feasible or possible to develop counter-deception
strategies (Bennett & Waltz, 2007) given that successful
deception feeds into, and exploits the adversary’s expectations
and preconceptions to “see that they expect to see”? It is easy to
preach as Sunzi did some two millennium ago that success in
battle depends upon knowing oneself first, but practicing that
maxim is not easy.
The third category of failures attributed to intelligence is their problems in relating to the policy maker. The mainstream expectation of the intelligence analyst is that he is to provide an objective and accurate picture of “what is out there” to his policy maker. He is not necessarily a part of the policy process to ensure that his estimates and assessments are not biased and politicized. But separated from the policy process risks the intelligence analyst, unaware of policy needs, producing estimates and assessments which are irrelevant to policy needs. The challenge as more than one intelligence analyst has recognized is how to be close to the policy maker without being caught in the policy process to produce politicized products which rationalized and justifies policy goals rather than objectively advising on the possible responses these policy goals might evoke from the adversary. As Paul R Pillar, a veteran CIA and National Intelligence Council officer and now Visiting Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University pointed out (2008), intelligence may correctly anticipate a crisis, but the policy maker either chooses to ignore it or is politically constrained and unable to act. Was US intelligence, as Richard Betts asks (2007) “wrong for the right reasons on the issue of WMD in Iraq?”

Finally, the fourth category of failures underpinning intelligence inability to better serve the policy maker is the cognitive biases driving intelligence analysis. As CIA veteran Richards J Heuer, Jr (1999) has advised his staff, there are biases in the evaluation of evidence; biases in perception of cause and
effect; biases in estimating probabilities and finally hindsight biases in evaluating the quality and value of intelligence products. Recognition by a generation of scholars from Roberta Wohlstetter in her 1962 classic study of Pearl Harbor to post-Yom Kippur Israeli scholars lead by Michael I Handel (2003) and includes Zvi Lanir (1983) and more recently Ariel Levite (1987) and Ephraim Kam (1988) to Richard Betts have all lamented the inevitability of strategic surprise in a crisis which could lead to a surprise attack. For these analysts, surprise is inevitable.

**IV. REVISING THE ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE IN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

This pessimistic conclusion that intelligence is unlikely to provide the foresight to pre-empt strategic surprise in a crisis is based on an understanding of the policy process as an empirically driven process of objective definition of the policy issue or problem, verifiable analysis of policy options and rational choice of a preferred policy to resolve the problem. It assumes that the policy maker is in control of the future in an ordered, predictable and stable world. An international crisis precipitated by an actor seeking to challenge the established order to his favour is then upsetting, destabilizing and needs to be contained and countered. The intelligence analyst is brought
into the policy process as a professional in the expectation that his expertise and insight can provide the policy maker the foresight to resolve the crisis. Towards this end the capacity for more effective strategic warning should be strengthened (Davis, 2007).

But the linear projections of the future based on trends from the past into the present which the policy maker demands for his empirically driven framework of policy making does not, as the preceding analysis indicates, work in the chaos of a crisis when normalcy has broken down and old cause and effect relations are no longer repeatable, perceivable or predictable. It is not the failure of strategic intelligence to predict crises, but the unpredictable nature of an increasingly uncertain and complex world we live in. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007) would point out, we are living in a world of “Black Swans.” As Taleb points out, the sighting of a Black Swan invalidated millennia of confirmatory sightings of millions of white swans. This metaphor of a Black Swan for human affairs, Taleb argues, is that a rare and hard or impossible to predict event which when it occurs, has a huge impact and changes the way we think of our world.

The implosion of the Soviet Union was in this sense a Black Swan. It was a cataclysmic crisis that challenged and undermined our paradigm of crisis management even further. States, especially superpowers, are not supposed to implode, creating crises; they are expected to decline, like the British Empire, over several decades after World War I. Post 1992 we are experiencing the unraveling of a new world in which the
policy maker may not be in control of. It is a more complex, unpredictable and uncertain world in which an increasingly networked world is driven by the emerging technologies of information processing and transmission. The 1997 financial crisis and the political fallout in Thailand and especially Indonesia, the SARS pandemic and the consequences of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre were crises we did not, and could not anticipate. The speed at which these crises developed challenged our response time. Policy makers are challenged to plan and control this unpredictable and uncertain world.

The challenge to policy making in the future is how to make sense of an increasingly complex world in which cause and effect are coherent only in hindsight and as such difficult to predict for a planned intervention to alter the effect (Gilliers 2007). Current work at RSIS focuses on developing methodologies for effective Horizon Scanning for weak signals of potential threats (Quiggin, 2007). Dave Snowden work on sense-making in a complex and complicated world is one methodology RSIS is examining. His “Cynefin framework” may be one way to help policy makers break out of their old mindsets of an ordered and known world to think about an alternative more complex and unknown world. In a complex and chaos world there is not one future we are working towards, but multiple futures we need to probe, make sense of and then respond to. The start point of policy is not necessarily the past leading into the known present and from here to then
work towards the knowable future. Rather the more useful start point may be the multiple futures which a crisis could lead to and probe for whether there are patterns among them which can then be worked back to our present.

Traditional data processing, as Max Boisot and Bill McKelvey (2006) have argued is hierarchic, in which the mountains of data is processed up wards through the layers of a pyramid of “experts” into a single Intelligence Estimate. For a complex world this pyramid has to be inverted in a search for patterns by networks of “experts” who are not necessarily in the intelligence community. Predictive warning may then be more a process of socializing the policy maker into understanding and accepting that there are multiple futures, the “dots” of which need to be connected into various patterns that could form probable futures or scenarios which the analyst and policy maker then needs to keep in view as they work out of their present into their preferred future.

The conventional reductive analysis of inductive pattern recognition to predict a warning of a crisis will have to change to a more open warning system that probes and attempts to make sense of possible multiple crises and together with the policy maker, judges and assesses which are the more probable crises scenarios they need to respond to. Such a change amounts to a paradigm shift in intelligence practice. Computer-aided analysis of competing hypotheses, Richard Heuer (2008) argues may be a way ahead. A more internet-centric warning system that can aid rapid learning and anticipation of non-linear
V. CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that intelligence did not get it right in many cases in predicting the course of events in a crisis that was spiraling to war. A series of cognitive biases in intelligence analysis exacerbated by the adversary’s deception of its intentions and denial of information about its actions makes for inevitable intelligence failure leading to strategic surprise. Reforms of the intelligence community to reduce the probability of future failures have created other unanticipated problems. These challenges are compounded in a complex world that challenges the underlying assumptions of order and predictability of our known world. A new approach to intelligence support for policy makers in an uncertain age is needed. This essay has suggested that a way forward may lie in the various emerging methodologies for information management and knowledge management.
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