







FROM PEARL HARBOR TO THE PARIS ATTACKS:

Political-Military Surprises
and the Conditions
that Cause Them

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Although in hindsight the element of surprise in attacks often appears unwarranted, various conditions inherent to intelligence organizations, policy makers, and adversaries make this evidence difficult to spot before the fact. In this essay, I demonstrate how cognitive biases, the nature of the adversary, and bureaucratic deficiencies are all conditions that facilitate surprises. Finally, I conclude that surprise is inevitable in some cases.



INTRODUCTION

Often, those with the ability to surprise hold a great advantage over their targets. Even a relatively weak actor can maximize its power if it succeeds in surprising its enemy, as ISIS did with its recent attacks in the Sinai, Beirut, and Paris. Although in hindsight the element of surprise in attacks often appears unwarranted, various conditions inherent to intelligence organizations, policy makers, and adversaries make this evidence difficult to spot before the fact. This essay will demonstrate how cognitive biases, the nature of the adversary, and bureaucratic deficiencies are all conditions that facilitate surprises.

COGNITIVE BIASES OF THE IC AND POLICYMAKERS

It is important to remember that analysts and policymakers are humans, whose preconceptions influence the way they absorb information. Perceptual and cognitive biases of analysts and policymakers often help the deceiver in achieving surprise.¹ A major aspect of these biases is misunderstanding of the enemy's intentions and capabilities, which often manifests itself in the form of underestimation. For instance, a key intelligence failure was the underestimation of Japanese capabilities and intentions before the attack on Pearl Harbor. According to David Kahn, a certain degree of racism led U.S. officials to underrate Japanese capabilities and will.² "Before Pearl Harbor was attacked, neither key decision-makers nor senior intelligence officials truly believed that the Japanese Navy was capable of mounting an attack on Hawaii," writes Dahl.³ Similarly, in both the North Korean invasion of South Korea and the following intervention of the Chinese in the Korean War, American intelligence and policymakers were caught off guard because they underestimated their enemies' intentions and

capabilities. American policymakers thought Chinese warnings to intervene in the Korean War if the U.S. crossed the 38th parallel were a bluff until China's intervention of force. Surprise during the Korean War resulted from underestimation of the Chinese, rather than lack of warning that they would intervene.⁴ Analysts in Washington failed to predict these moves because they believed that the Soviets controlled North Korean and Chinese decision-making.⁵ Few in Washington challenged the view that Moscow held absolute authority over other communist states.⁶ Various CIA reports described the military buildup of DPRK forces, and yet American officials still discounted the possibility of invasion, holding onto the belief that North Korea could not launch a successful attack without Soviet assistance and direction—a prelude to a world war that the Soviets were not willing to undertake.⁷ MacArthur and others strongly believed that no Asian troops would dare confront the American military and risk certain defeat. Intelligence analysts' preconceptions so hindered their

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vision of reality that they developed another explanation to rationalize the initial entry of Chinese forces in Korea, which held that they were protecting hydroelectric plants along the border.⁸ Cognitive biases also played a large role in the surprise of the Cuban Missile Crisis. U.S. analysts and policymakers failed to view the situation from the Soviet point of view—a failure of estimative empathy that led them to ignore the strong deterrent motive that the Soviets had for placing missiles in Cuba.⁹

For the intelligence process to be successful, not only does relevant intelligence have to be properly gathered and analyzed, but also appreciated by policymakers and acted upon. The allure of deferring a decision emerges from policymakers' tendency to postpone making significant financial and political sacrifices until warnings are all but overwhelming, often resulting in surprise attacks.¹⁰ Defensive actions can only be undertaken at some—and often very high—cost. Since believing warnings implies high costs, policymakers often prefer not to heed these. Subconsciously, the consumers will pay more attention to reassuring data while challenging the credibility of the source or rationalizing away unwelcome warnings.¹¹ According to Jervis, once policymakers have decided on a course of action they will be especially unreceptive to contrary evidence. Byman says the cognitive failures of 9/11



Korean War: Members of the 68th Battalion, Division Artillery attached to the 1st ROK Div., fire their 90mm anti-aircraft guns. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

were worse among policy makers than among intelligence analysts.¹² “At times, intelligence analysts may correctly identify a problem, but policymakers’ own biases do not change sufficiently for them to address the new problem,” writes Byman.¹³ The failure to thwart the 9/11 attacks was not due to lack of strategic warning, but rather to inaction of policymakers in terms of defending against the

threat. “If the political system decides not to undertake costly defensive measures in response to ample but imperfect warning, the failure is at least as much one of policy as of intelligence,” writes Betts.¹⁴ In the case of 9/11, decision makers received many warnings of potential terrorist attacks, which ironically desensitized them to the threat as a result of over-warning. However, this lack of reception is not entirely the policymakers’ fault. Lack of tactical evidence is largely to blame here for widening the “warning-response gap.”¹⁵ Ambiguity makes it easier for policymakers to ignore intelligence, which they already do selectively based on certain preconceptions of the enemy.

Uri Bar-Josef asserts that Israeli intelligence’s familiarity with and penetration into Iran led to its success in predicting the fall of the Shah, as opposed to the U.S. failure, which spawned from fundamental misunderstandings and preconceptions.¹⁶ The CIA overestimated the Shah’s willingness to use force to suppress the opposition, while failing to understand how unpopular he was with locals. Since the Shah was a U.S. ally, motivated biases and wishful thinking colored the lens through which intelligence viewed the situation. Analysts did not think the situation was that bad yet since the Shah had not cracked down. This error was fed by the false assumption that the Shah would crack down if the situation deteriorated to a dangerous point.¹⁷ The U.S. overestimated the Shah’s power while underestimating the role of religion in Iranian society. “Policymakers often base their interpretations on their own theories, expectations, and needs, sometimes ignoring costly signals,” writes Yarhi Milo.¹⁸ In the case of Iran in 1979, policymakers certainly ignored key costly signals due to cognitive biases.

Finally, both policymakers and analysts struggle with imagining alternative or unlikely situations due to pre-existing notions. Since alternative explana-

tions, such as deception, can easily be found, humans tend to favor explanations that fit their preconceptions or the popular hypothesis—a symptom of confirmation bias.¹⁹ Although there were a few clues that could lead to speculation on the location of the attack, Pearl Harbor was a highly improbable target. Similarly, some may not have anticipated ISIS's strikes outside its so-called caliphate, since such behavior is both uncharacteristic of the actor and seemingly irrational in regard to its strategic goals. Failure to identify these unlikely targets exhibits the “very human tendency to pay attention to the signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior,” according to Wohlstetter.²⁰ Betts argues that this situation is to an extent necessary, since information cannot be interpreted in a void.²¹ However, this framework can at times lead to massive intelligence failures. Analysts may prefer information that fits consensus rather than considering alternative or less probable explanations. According to Jervis, empathy is particularly difficult when “the other’s beliefs and behaviors are strange and self-defeating,” as was true in Iraq before the Persian Gulf War. For instance, while the U.S. assumed that Iraq would employ the fastest way to produce fissionable material—“mirror imaging”—Iraq actually chose a slower method to deceive intelligence agencies about their capabilities. This failure led to overcorrection on—and thus overestimation of—Iraqi WMD capabilities in 2002. Here, Saddam’s secrecy towards UN weapons inspectors was viewed as self-defeating, and therefore few analysts, if any, considered other alternatives for this behavior.

DECEPTIVE NATURE OF THE ADVERSARY AND INEVITABILITY OF SURPRISE

Deception is the key to surprise, allowing an attacker to misdirect the enemy’s efforts and atten-

tion from where an attack is expected to be.²² According to Handel, deception helps the weaker party make up for what it is lacking in strength.²³ So, even if the victim has strategic warning, he will be deceived as to the tactical details of the attack, rendering strategic warning useless. For instance, noise level was purposely increased before the attack on Pearl Harbor, leading some to think that the Japanese were planning an attack on Russia. An abundance of irrelevant material—in particular, threats from Europe—made Japanese deception possible, as analysts were unable to sort relevant signals from “noise.”²⁴ In the days leading up to Pearl Harbor, when commanders in Hawaii received reports that the Japanese in Honolulu were burning their codes, they were not alarmed since they had received similar reports earlier in the year and nothing had happened. Similarly, the North Korean invasion of South Korea was preceded by frequent maneuvers probing the border, creating such a level of noise that “the actual initiation of hostilities was not distinguished from preceding tests and false alarms,” according to Wohlstetter.²⁵ “The problem of false alarm has been involved in most cases of surprise attack,” writes Betts.²⁶ The enemy’s deceptive efforts, or the feeding of “noise” into the system often cause false alarm. When the warning is a continuum, truly alarming information is hard to spot. Ironically, an agency effectively gathering intelligence may be even more thrown off by these fake signals. “Simple indecision (or last minute decisions) by the attacker can prevent clear signals from being picked up by the defender because there are no clear signals,” writes Betts.²⁷ Schedule changes and deferrals—which non-state actors like ISIS are more capable of—feed the defender’s expectation that nothing is likely to happen, and over-warning causes insensitivity that strengthens the “cry wolf” syndrome.²⁸ Officers will be embarrassed if their

predictions do not pan out, and will therefore be more hesitant to make future predictions.

Deception and denial by the adversary make it extremely hard for agencies to collect tactical intelligence, though they may have plenty of strategic warning. Wohlstetter believes intelligence failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor not for paucity of relevant materials, but due to an abundance of irrelevant ones. Conversely, Dahl asserts that surprise attacks succeed because intelligence analysts do not have enough relevant information to examine. According to Dahl, the main reason for surprise attacks is a lack of tactical intelligence and precise warning. Ultimately, both “noise” and lack of tactical evidence are largely results of deception. The difficulties involved in avoiding deception are great. Additionally, “deception is cheap... neither labor nor capital intensive,” according to Handel.²⁹ Adversaries constantly and actively seek to counter intelligence gathering by whatever means possible. Japan had been so careful in sealing leaks and limiting knowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack that even the vast amount of intelligence acquired by code breaking did not reveal evidence of the plan.³⁰ Since tactical-level intelligence is virtually requisite to thwart an attack, decision-makers find this intelligence much more actionable than broad strategic warnings.³¹ Tenent’s forceful strategic warning about the threat that al-Qaeda posed “was accompanied by a failure to learn clues about the specifics of the attack on the U.S. homeland,”³² according to Byman. In addition to deception through “noise” and secrecy, an attacker can also deceive its victim by changing the way in which it operates to defy the victim’s expectations. Adversaries use shifts in tactics and innovations to weaponry to catch their victims by surprise, as evidenced by al Qaeda’s innovative use of airplanes as weapons during 9/11. “Too often, assessments of failure focus on the mistakes

of the victim rather than on the skill of the adversary,” writes Lowenthal.³³ Al Qaeda was and is a particularly skilled and deceptive adversary who makes collection and disruption extremely difficult for its targets. The nature of terrorist organizations makes them particularly good at deception, since they operate at lower—and less conspicuous—levels than nation-states. Due to their “bare-bones” infrastructures, terrorist groups are more adaptable and harder to track.

LIMITS OF BUREAUCRACIES

Limits to perception and communication are inherent to any large bureaucratic organization. In such environments, it is easy for intelligence to get ignored, distorted, or lost.³⁴ For instance, accord-



Pearl Harbor: Burning ships at Pearl Harbor. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

ing to Wohlstetter, a lack of relevant information was not a factor behind the Pearl Harbor surprise.³⁵ Wohlstetter posits that the problem was that the signals lay scattered in various different agencies, and no person or agency was able to unite all the signals in the vast information network.³⁶ In addition to the difficult task of accurately perceiving a signal as a warning, analysts must also get the warning heard and acted upon—perhaps an even more arduous task.³⁷ Even if a significant warning is acknowledged, it may already be too late to prepare

for a strike, due to the pace at which bureaucracies operate.³⁸ Bureaucracies have a hard time changing their approaches to problem solving, even if it is recognized that their approach is inadequate.³⁹ “At times, responsibility may be too diffuse; everyone has some share of the overall problem, so no particular person considers it his or her job to act,” writes Byman.⁴⁰ High-level officials, who have the requisite clearances to see the big intelligence picture, often don’t have time to analyze it, while lower level officials, who have more time, cannot see the full picture. Furthermore, getting different government agencies to share information that is required to fulfill their basic functions is surprisingly difficult, accentuating the “connect the dots” problem. For instance, if the CIA and FBI had shared information better in the years preceding the 9/11 attacks, they could have gotten more leads in terms of tactical evidence. “Bureaucracies push behavior towards the rational and non-emotional ends of the spectrum,” while often lacking in the practice of imagination, according to Knorr.⁴¹



unlike their usual targeting of the “near enemy.” Such changes in strategy take advantage of existing preconceptions, aiding in deception. However, CIA director John Brennan said in a recent interview: “It’s not a surprise that this attack was carried out, from the standpoint that we did have strategic warning about an attack in Europe.”⁴² Ultimately, though, strategic warning is almost useless without concrete tactical evidence, especially in regards to a flexible group such as ISIS. Although the attack may not have surprised Brennan, it certainly surprised the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

In a way, all the reasons for failure in predicting surprise attacks are linked. Ultimately, we must accept that some surprise attacks are inevitable, and be prepared to have a cushion for when they do happen. The deceptive nature of ISIS as an organization is the factor that probably helped it the most in achieving surprise with its recent attacks. When the enemy is a constantly moving, changing target such as ISIS, the problem of estimating its capabilities and intentions is magnified. Terrorist groups like ISIS are more capable of deception than are state actors with a bigger infrastructure and visibility, making it harder for tactical evidence to be collected. The main factor of surprise in the recent ISIS attacks is that they targeted the “far enemy,”

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