

UNDERSTANDING SOURCES - THE REAL CHALLENGE

by Richard Horowitz

The objective of Open Source Solutions is to better our national security and competitiveness through the proper utilization of open source information. In line with that objective, this short essay will attempt to further the discussion along parallel and equally significant objectives, and, in the spirit of open sources, will utilize many.

The underlying thesis of this essay is that the nature of understanding information, whether open source or classified, has intrinsic difficulties which can make the analyst's task at times nearly impossible. The noted military historian, Liddell Hart, observed that:

"When, in the course of studying a long series of military campaigns, I first came to perceive the superiority of the indirect over the direct approach, I was looking merely for light upon strategy. With deepened reflection, however I began to realize that the indirect approach had a much wider application- that it was a law of life in all spheres: a truth of philosophy...This idea of the indirect approach is closely related to all problems of the influence of mind upon mind- the most influential factor in human history."¹

Yet, Barbara Tuchman comments on the strange state of government affairs:

"A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests. Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgement acting on common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why do intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?"²

The following will analyze the paradox of why the application of a seemingly ostensible truth often results in unintended and at times almost inexplicable results.

The game theory model of Prisoner's Dilemma suggests a certain truth with respect to behavior that can shed light on our question at hand. Prisoner's Dilemma demonstrates a situation where one's actions are inexorably intertwined with another's, and how foreknowledge of the other's actions is exceedingly important, yet not necessarily helpful. Prisoner's Dilemma places two actors in a situation where in trying to pursue their own best interests, an unavoidable dilemma is confronted and no solution is at hand. The Prisoner's Dilemma matrix clearly shows how rational actors will choose an option that is not the one which will best serve his interests, but will only minimize the damage taking into consideration that one actor's future is intertwined with the other. In the words of Kenneth Oye, "individually rational actions produces a collectively suboptimal outcome."³

Prisoner's Dilemma is an appropriate model to use when analyzing behavior. The extensive use of this model in testifies to its widespread application. To bring just two examples, in "The Nature of Politics," a discussion of the relationship between politics and biology, Roger Masters affords

Richard Horowitz is president of Executive Services International, an investigative and security consulting firm based in New York. He has served on the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces with the rank of captain and held a Mortimer Zuckerman Fellowship at Columbia University.

Prisoner's Dilemma much prominence in a section on "Cost-Benefit Theories of Cooperation."⁴ In "Unguided Missiles; How America Buys Its Weapons," Fen Hampson makes use of Prisoner's Dilemma in an Appendix entitled "Competitive-Cooperative Behavior in the Defense Budget."⁵

Strategies have been suggested for increasing the likelihood of action that best serves the interests of all involved in a Prisoner's Dilemma situation. Oye discusses collective enforcement as good strategies⁶, and maintains that "a reputation for reliability, for resisting temptation, reduces the likelihood of defection" (defection being that which each side is fearful the other side would do and hence opts to do first).⁷ In "Strategy and Conscience," Anatol Rapoport also discusses "enforceable agreement" as an aid in overcoming the obstacles presented by the dilemma. The continuation of his reasoning however illustrates an inherent problem of intelligence:

"if we assume that the two players of prisoner's dilemma can make a pact...to effect the mutually advantageous outcome...the prospective partners must have a common language. They must also either profess allegiance or render obedience to a common authority, either coercive, like a police force, or internalized like conscience. That is to say, pacts must be enforceable...the assumption that agreements are enforceable is therefore vital if coalitions and collusions are to be included as factors in rational decisions."⁸

Rapoport understands that relying on common language or the other's sense of obedience is dangerous. The section that suggests these arrangements is entitled "The Dilemma Has Not Been Resolved."⁹

Steve Brams also recognizes that communication between the two actors is crucial. "To escape the dilemma, therefore, one must assume that there is some communications between the players... the only clean escape from the dilemma...occurs when the two players can communicate."¹⁰

Brams however cites the problems that Rapoport alludes to; "...what is to prevent the leader from lying about his announced intentions to cooperate unconditionally?"¹¹ The solution is of course verification. To summarize Brams;

"...national technical means of verification, which each side now possesses and can utilize without dependence on the other side, can make cooperation...rational in Prisoner's Dilemma...in a world of uncertainty, no precautions that either side takes will ever be foolproof...a players trust will not be misplaced if it is undergirded by monitoring capabilities that make the success of a double-cross strategy bleak."¹²

This solution makes theoretical sense and in practice is responsible for much of the success that intelligence has to offer. Why however, no precaution will be foolproof despite the theoretical validity and practical confirmation of its usefulness is one of the inherent flaws of intelligence.

An opportunity to see how information can be misunderstood is shown in selections from a book reviewed in Newsweek entitled "Love is Never Enough."¹³

The review brings three examples of short and simple conversations between two people that were greatly misunderstood. Interestingly, the titles given to summarize these examples are Clashing Views, Withheld Information, and Missed Signals, terms that can be similarly applied to international and governmental relations.

The following are the examples of the conversation:

Missed Signals: Max calls Sybil from a medical convention:

Max: (Sybil will be glad I'm getting on so well) I'm having a great time. How are you?

Sybil: (He's having a great time while I have two sick kids on my hands) Joan and Freddie are sick.

Max: (Oh no, she's going to lay something on me) What's the matter with them?

Sybil: (Will he show a sense of responsibility?) They have the chicken pox. They're running a fever.

Max: (Chicken pox is not serious. She's exaggerating) You don't have to worry. They'll be OK.

Sybil: (Why doesn't he offer to come home?) All right.

Max: I'll call tomorrow.

Sybil: (He's never around when I need him) You do that.

Clashing Views: Laura tests the devotion of her fiance:

Laura: Will you stay home tonight? I think I have the flu.

Fred: I'm already committed to see Joe (a colleague).

Laura: (If he won't do this small favor for me, how can I count on him when I have a major problem?) You never want to stay home. I very rarely ask you to do anything.

Fred: (If she insists on keeping me home for such a small thing, what will happen when something big happens- like when we have kids?) I'm sorry, but I really have to go.

Laura: (I should get out of the relationship while I can find somebody I can depend on) Go ahead if you want to. I'll find somebody else to stay with me.

Withheld Information: Sally and Tom, with whom she lives, have been invited to visit some friends:

Sally: The Scotts said something about dropping over on Thursday.

Tom: (jumping to the wrong conclusion) They invited you?

Sally: I just told you (He's challenging my veracity)

Tom: (hurt) How come they invited you?

Sally: Obviously they like me (He doesn't think I'm likable enough on my own)

Tom: Well go. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time (I hope she has a terrible time)

Sally: (bitter) I'm sure I will.

An observer listening to these conversations would not necessarily realize a mistake is being made, and could conceivably arrive at the same error as one of the participants.

These misunderstandings can serve as a model for the following theoretical example. Through a general understanding of A's behavior, an observer is convinced that A would not do X; X not being in A's interests, according to the observer's analysis. It has come to the observer's attention that A told B he will do X. There is no question as to the accuracy of the information; the conversation was recorded, for example. A indeed told B that he will do X. The most obvious conclusion to draw is that the observer was mistaken in thinking that A would not do B. A revealed his true intentions to B, indicating that the observer miscalculated A's intentions. This seems to be clear cut. The observer, on the other hand, convinced that A realizes that X is not in his interests, may very well remain convinced, and conclude that the new information brought to his attention is indicative of a worsening of relations between A and B; otherwise, A would not tell B that he will do something that he clearly would not do.

If the function of intelligence is to understand the information that you have acquired, the problematics of intelligence can now be seen. The logically unsolvable Prisoner's Dilemma, the examples of misunderstandings, and the theoretical problem of being convinced that A will not do X, shed light on the contrast between Hart and Tuchman and demonstrates the problematics in properly understanding what you see before you.

Preconceptions play a significant role in intelligence analysis as well. Consider the following report that Chamberlain gave to the British cabinet on his impressions of Mussolini after a trip to Italy in 1939 shows how wrong one's appraisal of another can be:

"I am convinced that Signor Mussolini and Herr Hitler cannot be very sympathetic to each other, and that although they have some interests in common their interests are not identical...Accordingly I, on several occasions, gave Mussolini a chance to express his real feelings of Herr Hitler. He never took the opportunity offered to him, but remained throughout absolutely loyal to Herr Hitler. At the time I was somewhat disappointed at this attitude, but on reflection think that it reflects credit on Signor Mussolini's character."¹⁴

Paul Johnson brings another example of, in his words, "the truly amazing extent to which intelligent, well informed and resolute men, in the pursuit of economy or in an altruistic passion for disarmament, will delude themselves about reality."¹⁵ Johnson summarizes a letter written by Churchill to the then British Prime Minister about the possibility of war with Japan:

"I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime. The Japanese are our allies...Japan is at the other end of the world. She cannot menace our vital national security in any way...she has no reason whatsoever to come into collision with us...war with Japan is not a possibility which any reasonable government need take into account."¹⁶

Even without preconceptions, the judgement needed to overcome the intrinsic problems of analysis is a very intangible and subjective matter. Immanuel Kant best described the problem of judgement when he wrote in 1793:

"An act of judgement must be added to the rational concept which contains a rule and it is by this act of judgement that the practitioner can decide whether something is to be subsumed under the rule or not. Since there cannot again be rules for judgement on how a subsumption is to be achieved, for this would go into the infinite, there will be theoreticians who, in their whole lives, can never become practical because they lack judgement."¹⁷

Information can be acquired, preconceptions may not interfere, and one's judgement may be sound. Yet, there are instances where foreknowledge is impossible because the decision-makers themselves do not know how they will decide. At times, events determine the decisions and not the proclivities of the decision-makers. Menachem Begin wrote about the "historico-philosophical argument between the 'idealists and the materialists': Which is the cause and which the effect? Do men make events or do unavoidable events make the men¹⁸?"

That not all events are determined by man makes predetermining them a more difficult task. Even if they were, the human mind is not capable of always freeing itself from misperceptions, bad judgements, and the possibility of misunderstanding. Intelligence however useful, can never be a perfect tool for decision-making. The real challenge for open source intelligence professionals is to overcome these intrinsic problems in the understanding of information.

FOOTNOTES

1. B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, Praeger Publisher, 1974), p. xx.
2. Barbara W. Tuchman, The March of Folly, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985), p.4.
3. Kenneth A. Oye, editor, Cooperation Under Anarchy, (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 8.
4. Roger D. Masters, The Nature Of Politics, (Yale University, Press, 1989), pp. 163-172.
5. Fen Osler Hampson, How America Buys Its Weapons, (W.W. Norton and Co., 1989), pp.295 and 300-301.
6. Kenneth A. Oye, *ibid*, p. 20
7. *ibid*, p. 14.
8. Anatol Rapoport, Strategy and Conscience, (Harper and Row, 1964), p. 56-7.
9. *ibid*, p. 56.
10. Steven J. Brams, Superpower Games, (Yale University Press, 1985), p. 95.
11. *ibid*.
12. *ibid*, pp. 149-50.
13. Dr. Aaron T. Beck, Love is Never Enough, (Harper and Row, 1988), reviewed in Newsweek, January 9, 1989, pp. 46-48.
14. Roger Parkinson, Peace for Our Time, (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), pp.91-2.
15. Paul Johnson, Modern Times, (Harper and Row, 1983), p. 175.
16. Martin Gilbert, Churchill, (Companion Volume,) Part 1, pp. 303-7, quoted in Johnson, *ibid*.
17. Immanuel Kant, Theory and Practice, in The Philosophy of Kant, Carl J. Friedrich, ed., (The Modern Library, Random House, 1977), P. 412.
18. Menachem Begin, The Revolt, (Henry Schuman, 1951), p.66.

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