

INTELLIGENCE AND CRISIS DECISION-MAKING: A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

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Abstract

Intelligence and decision making in crisis are intimately interconnected. Firstly, because of the beneficiaries of the intelligence activity (Davies, 2012), the decision makers. Secondly, because the acute need of suitable, in depth and accurate products (Hibbs—Pherson and Pherson, 2017), delivered timely is crucial in times of crisis. Therefore the interdisciplinary teaching, research and cross domains methodologies are crucial for the next generation of intelligence professionals who need to be closer to the needs of the beneficiaries, with a broader knowledge and a better capacity of communicating their analysis (Major, 2014). Our paper explores crisis decision making methodologies, prospective studies analysis, and scenario making instruments in order to provide a better focus and approach in intelligence teaching both in university and for specialization and training of the people already involved in the intelligence, when it comes the interaction between analysis and the beneficiaries.

Keywords: *crisis decision making, small groups' dynamics, prospective studies, intelligence briefers.*

Theory and practice, interference in intelligence studies. Early warning techniques. What to search for?

Intelligence studies should utilize the critical tools and techniques developed in related disciplines. The intelligence officers need to have solid methodological grounds for their assessments in order to reduce the number of errors, control them (Johnson, 2007), and know what the source of such errors of assessment is. Moreover,

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knowing the methodologies of related sciences, time proved and with a lots of empirical feedback, helps also in knowing what to search for.

This is first and foremost valuable for an analysts, as long as the internal circuits of intelligence cycle allow at any point analysts to interfere with the process of data and intelligence gathering and communicating to operatives on the ground what they should look for in order to fill the gaps of the puzzle that analysts are trying to clarify and put together. As long as such a process of revision of data is ongoing inside the intelligence cycle, this type of knowledge is of tremendous interest, helping in raising the effectiveness and efficiency of the intelligence process (Hulsky and Schmitt, 2002).

There are specific fields where methodology is utmost importance for intelligence. The first is the whole spectrum of theories related to early warning. In fact, the very creation of an early warning system based on a complex of threats, risks, vulnerabilities is the best way of theoretically address intelligence gathering, intelligence analysis and effectiveness. It is also the way that any gathering intelligence plan is drafted (Hermann, 1999), followed by allocation of resources and building networks able to reach the targeted and needed data.

The knowledge of early warning tools and techniques, theoretical background and approach to mathematical control theories and approximation of errors is of tremendous importance in estimating the success and certainty of the results of an operation of intelligence gathering. It is also very important in order to know how big an error one can expect after such an endeavour (Jervis, 2010). It helps, on a distinct note, to avoid strategic surprises once we are talking about *black swan* events – low probability/high impact evolutions. Also it's useful for drafting any type of assistance from a computer model in that area, who needs to observe the rules of the theoretical models already identified.

For sure, intelligence has its own field of expertise and theories. Some are linked to psychology, to interpretation, some to the errors of small group decisions and groupthink. But relying on the theoretical ground already developed in other scientific domains helps a lot in narrowing errors of assessment and streamlining the search for valuable facts and data for intelligence products.

Conflict analysis. Need for effective prevention. Critical indicators

Another field of research and expertise with its own methodological background and methodologies is the conflict analysis, or as it has originally named, Conflict Resolution (Ramsbotham et.al. 2005). A well-established domain, a discipline well developed since 1965, where techniques of approaching it are based on solid grounds and more than half of century of research. It would be a pity to not use this field of research and its achievements.

The conflict analysis methodologies, from definition of concepts and Galtung's models, with the full debate about perception of self and of the other – in the Cain and Abel approach (Chifu and Lupu, 2016) – with the escalation/de-escalation model or the hourglass model are of tremendous importance for the number of experiences and analysis made based on those methodologies (Wallenstein, 2003) and the very careful evaluation of errors.

This helps when those models are applicable to any type of conflict (Deutsch et.al. 2006), either it is an inter-personal one, a community level, a societal conflict or even an interstate military one. The methodology helps in identifying the turning points and the stages achieved by which actor being analysed. And it helps create the charts for the critical indicators that to be followed in order to know the escalation model or, on the contrary, the turning points and the de-escalation path (Sandole et.al. 2009).

Knowledge is also well served when following the very subtle indicators that make the passage from dispute to contradiction, from an existing contradiction to conflictual attitudes of the two or more parties involved in a conflict and from the manifest attitudes to really acting aggressively, to a conflictual behaviour with its own stages of violence (Levinger, 2013). It also help since for each such stage, conflict analysis has drafted, exercised and applied tools and techniques in order to contain, to avoid escalation and to de-escalate the conflict, or to predict the re-ignition and explosion of violence (Jeong, 2008).

For an intelligence service it is of utmost importance that the strong theoretical base allows it to know what to look for, where to search for those critical indicators that make the difference between

war and peace (Hermann, 1999), between a domestic fight and a hate crime, and where to find hints on every evolution of such a developing conflict. This is a real challenge and nobody should deny this transfer of methodologies.

And here we are not talking about the very important studies developed in interethnic conflicts and religious conflicts (Said et.al. 2001), with their own instruments dealing with radicalization or inter-sectarian conflicts. Here psychology is playing an important role, as do studies related to the fundamental needs of and the individual, including identity, the individual and group identity (Chifu, 2012a). These needs, once they are not fulfilled, the individual is exposed to the offers to obtain a purpose in life, to find the true belief and to play a role, hold a position and deal with important tasks inside its community, a community that appreciates him. Those mechanisms are a clear path to radicalization and transitioning to action (Chifu, 2012b), from attitude to a radical behaviour and to terrorist action.

Another field where these methodologies could be used are in informational warfare (Chifu and Nantoi, 2016). It is also a process that involves a lot of recent methods derivation from marketing and channelling into micro-targeting at the level of the whole population, split into categories that need to be addressed differently, see the 32 categories of Cambridge Analytica (Chifu, 2017). When the influence moves from consumer preferences to political ones and when those technique address the will and options of a citizen who is supposed to vote, we are already in a domain where fundamental threats to security, decision making capacity and leadership choice is at stake and those techniques need to be addressed properly (Simons and Chifu, 2017), learned and used in order to have counter reactions, to protect the population through awareness and education, and to identify the critical indicators to be monitor in order to prevent a possible external involvement in such evolutions and public choices (Chifu, 2015).

Crisis decision making as a tool for intelligence officers. Where to look?

Another field of direct interest for intelligence studies is the crisis decision making. I would even say that it is of major importance

to know the cognitive – institutional approach to crisis, to know the methodology of analysing decision making in times of crisis and to know what drives the reactions – both good and bad – of a decision maker in times of crisis (Stern, 2001). This is helpful also due to the fact that it involves an average decision maker who could be a normal person with average professional skills, elected in a public position and required to react and to solve a crisis.

Here the knowledge targets the most important and intimate decision making skills, preferences, the psychological structure of a decision maker, the dynamics of his small decision making team, and the possibility to influence such a dynamic. Moving further, a crisis is a specific situation of stress and pressure which is exposing internal skills, professional experience, knowledge and character of a decision maker, some characteristics that are very important for estimating his reaction (Chifu and Ramberg, 2007). How much rationality and how much emotion or ambition lies behind the decision. How such a person could be framed by external actors and guided in order to take a required or bad decision.

Crisis decision making is a field that is close to the intelligence studies because the whole mechanism of intelligence is also responsible dealing with or preventing a crisis, reacting to pressure and public perceptions, assisting decision makers with the best advice possible and much needed information in order to deal with a crisis (De Keiser and Tames, 2008). And, in that respect, there are some parts where intelligence is playing a crucial role.

Separating information from noise is a crucial endeavour in times of crisis. Under pressure, a decision maker do not have time to properly select and make the best use of the data and information that comes in flows and to realize what is really important (Sundelius and Bach, 2015). In that particular situation, intelligence itself could help and assist with proper filters in order to select the repetitive useful data coming from witnesses in a crisis, and to identify the marginal data with a unique source which could change dramatically the situation if proved true, so it needs to be saved for further evaluation, even though that data is not in the mainstream flow of information.

A second moment where intelligence is of help is in the conflict of values. For sure, it is up to the designated decision maker to choose, when he has to deal with competitive fundamental values, because he's entitled and legally assigned to do so. But there's also a moment where intelligence could help and assist when consequence management is involved. In order to have a proper and accurate representation of its actions and decisions, as well as a realistic pressure level he is dealing with in a specific case, it is of first importance that the decision maker knows what the consequences (Boin et.al. 2008) of its decisions are.

Furthermore, crisis decision making methodologies are helping when dealing with crises in the intelligence field. An analyst knowing the way crises are evolving and how those crises trends are managed has the possibilities to identify the critical indicators that must be monitored and where an agent should look in order to find the concrete hints about the way a crisis evolves. The characteristics of a decision making team and psychological premises for a decision maker are of tremendous importance in trying to anticipate and build scenarios for the future evolution of a crisis or of an actor who is supposed to deal with a crisis.

Prospective studies and scenario making. Lessons learned adapted for intelligence studies

Another field of research and domain that intelligence needs to follow is prospective studies. Here, too, methodologies are developed and results are on the table with a whole abundance of experiences and lessons learned. In prospective studies the first step lies in the selection of critical indicators and the errors of the original assessment (Chifu, 2015a). Moreover, the evolution speed of a process could ruin the premises and assumptions regarding its evolution.

Here lies one of the most important, I would even say, crucial tasks of an intelligence service: avoiding strategic surprise (Chifu, 2015b). In some parts of the world strategic surprise – meaning that a decision maker is not warned in due time about the possibility that a major change happens in his field of responsibility – could lead to the resignation of the leader of the intelligence institution in question. It is

about the prestige, credibility and legitimacy of the intelligence institution itself. So that strategic surprise should be avoided.

And it's not always easy to do so, in a turbulent world, with tremendous changes, happening very fast, with leaders and decision makers that ignore logic, professional advices and rational choices in favour of ideological / emotional ones or those influenced by the will to obtain advantages and benefits from the crisis (Chifu and Nantoi, 2015). It is true, a crisis is a threat and an opportunity, but playing with fire and the apprentice wizard approach could lead to huge catastrophes. And examples are abundant in contemporary crisis decision making, when playing with a high risk leads to losing control and creating catastrophes – Rene Thom's theory.

It is the case of Jose Maria Aznar and the Atocha train station terrorist attack (Ray, 2004), before general elections that he was in the lead with his Popular Party in Spain, and when he tried to win more and chose to blame ETA Basque separatist movement and its socialist political competitors for this. Before the elections the reality was revealed, Al Qaeda was to blame and the Popular Party lost elections, Spanish army retreated from Afghanistan and from that moment on, Spain lost its position of a reliable ally and a country willing to invest in eradicating international terrorism.

A second well known case is that of Prime Minister David Cameron: in order to win elections, he promised to organize a referendum for Brexit, and then, in order to maximize his political position, he organised the referendum for exiting the EU, with a clear expectation that the result is going to consolidate his pro-European position inside the Conservative Party (Eline, 2019). And the result proved to be unexpected, he lost his job as prime minister and left Great Britain in a bad position. So playing with high risk decisions and using emotional or ideological arguments instead of professional and rational ones could lead to complicated outcomes.

In the related field of scenario development, there's also a lot to learn which can be used in intelligence studies and practice about the way this is developed. First, it is about identifying relative certainties, critical uncertainties and tipping points in an evolution in order to come up with a scenario (Chifu, 2014). Then it is about the selection of critical

indicators and drivers of a process or another that we are studying in its evolution. And third, it is about arranging scenarios in trends, those with discontinuities and last but not least, the black swan scenarios (Chifu and Bălăşoiu, 2018).

We have developed a Romanian model in that respect and applied it to several cases and several moments, identifying even the mistakes and errors when assessing scenarios related to an ongoing crisis. The lessons learned lead us to consider the *black swan* scenarios developed for each of the relative certainty evolutions. And it really helped us in the scenario making. The aim to avoid strategic surprise forced both scenario making processes, in prospective studies as well as the practice in intelligence, to include the scenarios – as improbable as they could be – that have important impact if they occur. And that is also an added value for intelligence studies as the experience and lessons learned from the process of identifying critical indicators that are channelling the evolution of an analysed process in one direction or another.

Intelligence and decision makers. A Bridge too far?

Last but not least, I think it is important to include a lesson from the methodological added value that other fields and domain of scientific research could bring in the study and practice of intelligence. It is the case when analysts and decision makers in intelligence agencies have the knowledge coming from those related fields of scientific research and the specialists in those fields inside the agency.

It is as important as having an “integrator” of the scientific studies and related fields that could both “translate” and integrate inside the agency the results of the research in those fields or even know what to require from research institutions outside of the Agency that could help the intelligence institution in bringing in the needed theoretical and methodological help from the scientific community, with a due consideration of the limits that the interference of those two fields, intelligence with its degree of secrecy or at least high level of discretion, and the science and academic community, far more open and who needs to breath and validate its results and findings and to communicate its achievements.

Intelligence agencies should become – if it is not already the case – contractors of research done in academic fields, to have a proper and effective instruments of integrating the result of the scientific research in the fields already underlined. And the perspective of having experts in all those fields and, in any case, analysts that know well the resources they could get from those related fields of research and methodological approaches, is of first importance.

Coming back to the original problem of the relation between decision maker and intelligence agency, the magnitude of issues connected to that relationship is huge. Beginning with building trust in a reciprocal manner and respect for the other's attributes and position, continuing with avoiding suspicion about the interference in its own attributes and the independence of the decision maker, continuing with a good and fruitful communication in order to absorb the essence and content of the intelligence product, there are full range of issues that are creating a complicated agenda (Ekengren, and Simons, 2011).

It's not easy and the relationship between intelligence and decision makers can be, sometimes, a bridge too far.

Firstly because of the different culture – of secrecy, extreme rigour and professionalism as well as responsibility and normative accountability, on one side, and of working with perceptions, public trust and public communication (Olson, 2008), political approaches and vindication as well as power politics and accumulating relevance, on the other side – the level of understanding, suspicion and trust could be difficult to match.

Secondly, because there's also the public perception, amplified by the media, that intelligence services are trying to use or distort or even control the options of the decision maker (Svedin, 2011). For a political elected figure that's a second way of life and it will always run away from the perspective of being controlled or of not being in power and dominating the intelligence agency. It's a second nature and it plays in the hands of those who support the deepening of a rift between intelligence and decision makers.

Once trust is established and the parties know exactly what they want and are open for the cooperation, some other level of issues appears. First it is about understanding the role and attributes: some

decision makers would not take no for an answer and could not understand the limits of intelligence activity, in terms of time and capabilities. In other cases the decision makers could look suspiciously at the field of operations that an intelligence agency runs in order to fulfil their role.

The professional background of the decision maker can vary a lot in a democracy. He could have education or not, he could have a higher knowledge level or a lower one, he could have a capacity to learn fast or be slow. And Intelligence agencies need to work with all those kinds of decision makers (Boin, 2005). They must communicate with them, and let them know what they are doing to assist them, what they can do, and what is not under their immediate reach.

Papers, documents and intelligence notes are playing an essential role in communication. But sometimes this should be doubled with intelligence briefers and visual demonstrations, information and other new forms of making sense in a specific manner adapted to the decision maker in question (Major, 2014). And for that purpose it is a pressing need to know the character, professional background and level of knowledge as well as the preferences of the decision maker in question (Osborne, 2017).

In some cases the appetite for intelligence is naturally high. Curiosity, a level of knowledge of the field he is responsible for and the professional and individual skills are playing the major role. But in other cases the appetite is very limited and even ideological or personal experiences are preventing the decision maker from listening, absorbing and making the best use of the intelligence he receives (Hansen, 2007).

Here a pro-active approach is needed to capture the attention and skilful intelligence agency leaders, head analysts and intelligence briefers are entitled to use creative instruments in order to obtain a reaction from the decision maker which reveals what he is interested in and what he needs to know, how to draw his attention to a particular process that he needs to be familiar with in his job, and how to fill the gap between the cultures that are governing intelligence and political activities or administrative decision making (*Bengt and Hansen, 2007*). And that's a challenge that could mean building the necessary specific

bridges rather than abandoning a decision maker who does not understand the usefulness and benefits of the intelligence activity and how to use the products that he receives.

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