



HOW SPIES THINK: TEN LESSONS IN INTELLIGENCE

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KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2021, Sir David Omand, visiting Professor in War Studies at King's College London and Former Director General of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), presented on *How Spies Think: Ten Lessons in Intelligence* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period session with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the role of intelligence in decision making, and the SEES model—Situational Awareness, Explanation, Estimation and modelling, and Strategic notice—as a valuable tool for analysts.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Sir David focused his presentation on the key takeaways of his publication, *How Spies Think: Ten Lessons in Intelligence*. He started by defining the purpose of intelligence and then used it as the backdrop for the SEES model. Sir David also suggested that every critical decision should connect the emotional needs from the decision and the rational constraints in making a sensible decision.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Sir David discussed the role of the security services, effective communication of intelligence assessments to the public, the warning nature of intelligence, and the politicisation of intelligence.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Sir David began his presentation by noting that the primary purpose of intelligence is to enable better decisions by reducing the ignorance of the decision maker regarding what is being faced. This applies to decisions made by prime ministers, military commanders, senior police officers, policymakers, business leaders, etc. As proposed in his book *How Spies Think: Ten Lessons in Intelligence*, whether analysts utilise secret sources or open sources, the following questions need to be answered: what does it really mean to say that decision makers use information to improve the quality of their decisions? How does one do that? What is needed to know to make good decisions? What did the intelligence community need to know to generate sensible warnings? How confident can one be that the information on which the warning is based is reliable?

The history of secret intelligence is littered with examples of deliberate deception, mistaken analysis, biases, prejudices, and, arguably, cognitive dissonance on the part of the decision makers, which lead them to ignore intelligence assessments. Therefore, when making critical decisions, satisfying and understanding emotional needs from the decision itself and its results must be tied to understanding the rational constraints of making a decision.

In his book, Sir David notes that keeping passion within rational bounds has always been hard, more so in the era of social media and today's politics, where respect for truth is not what it used to be. For instance, falsehoods spread on social media during the Brexit referendum and during the U.S. and France presidential elections, as well as the deliberate attempts to widen divisions in democratic societies. Such reality can easily generate an induced feeling of 'I would like that to be true', or, by the constant social media repetition, the feeling of 'it might be true,' which can easily slide into the feeling of 'well, for me, it is as good as true, and I will act as if it is true.' Sir David noted that a good example is the emotions—based on a conspiracy theory still believed by millions of heavily armed U.S. voters—that fueled the invasion of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

Arguably, the world is now in the 'post truth social media era,' where respecting the value of truth no longer seems as important as saying something, even if not strictly true, to create the desired emotional impact. Thus, Sir David proposes four outputs that are helpful for rational decision-making: 1) situational

awareness, 2) explanation, 3) estimation and modelling, and 4) strategic notice—(abbreviated as SEES).

Situational awareness comes from accessing data about ‘what has happened, where, and when,’ but it is strictly related to a past event since there is always a time delay. Intelligence reporting comes with both latency and perishability. Time carries several meanings for intelligence officers, one of them being, ‘the objective measure of the duration of the interval between events. Time, thus, is associated with location in space and it can be analysed as a sequence of events to which we can apply the Bayesian inference to relate effects-backed causes. Therefore, to analyse an event, it is helpful to use factual questions that start with ‘what, when, and where.’ Sometimes, establishing the facts in a confused situation makes a decision easier, and it is necessary to establish some reliable situational awareness before leaders try to decide what to do. However, one must be humble to recognize the first lesson in intelligence: ‘our knowledge of the world is necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, and sometimes wrong.’ One must not jump to inductive conclusions since data by itself is dumb and even established facts can have multiple interpretations. This leads to the second lesson in intelligence: ‘facts need explaining.’

Confirmation bias means that individuals are liable to choose the explanation that best fits their preconceptions and prejudices. Therefore, it is necessary to test alternative explanations or hypotheses against the data and look for the explanation that has the least evidence against it instead of the one with most in its favour. Explanation in international affairs, for example, is difficult because analysts must possess background knowledge, foreign language skills, and a sense of the relevant history, geography, anthropology, psychology, current affairs, and the region. Notwithstanding, when western analysts try to see into the mind of someone from a very different culture, including the actions of dictators by heedless international opinion, the risks of mirror imaging and transfer judgement are always present. However, if analysts have a sound, evidence-based explanation of the data, it is possible to be more confident about proceeding to estimate how events are likely to unfold and model how others might respond to possible actions. Estimation and modelling allow a decision maker to answer vital questions about how likely is the adversary to react if one acts or does not act in a particular way or adopt a particular policy.

According to Sir David, the inductive fallacy of moving straight from facts to prediction, without having a sound explanation of what is really going on under the surface is a trap for the unwary. However, with a good explanatory model and sufficient data, it is possible to model different outcomes on the basis of

different assumptions, including assumptions about what the adversary might think the reaction would be to his moods. This is the application of Bayesian inference—working forward from data that was gathered to understand the situation that led to it and use that understanding to estimate how events may happen. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that data requires explanation, and if there is not a stable, satisfactory explanation or path dependency, even the most advanced methods or advanced AI cannot forecast anything.

Lastly, with strategic notice it is possible to work backwards from the future to the present by identifying possible longer-term developments to help policymakers consider whether it is worthwhile to take precautionary steps or even to take steps that might avoid that future altogether. Using imagination or abductive reasoning provides strategic notice of many of the future developments of interest. For example, there is strategic notice that a working quantum computer will likely be developed within the next 5 to 10 years that works at a large scale; the strategic notice might be that China could develop it first. However, that is not a prediction that will definitely happen but only that it is plausible and that such a future will pose significant risks. Therefore, armed with that strategic notice, it is possible to mitigate the risk by investing more now into research and by keeping a very careful intelligence eye on Chinese quantum technology. By devoting effort to acquiring strategic notice and using it to prepare for a possible outcome, decision makers will not be so ‘surprised by surprise.’

Sir David finalised his presentation by pointing out that analysts cannot fully escape their unconscious emotional framing of issues, precisely because they are unconscious. Information is obtained through our senses and goes straight into our minds, and without knowing it, the process of emotional framing begins. For that reason, analysis should be a team sport so that others can spot what a single individual cannot. Policymakers can also benefit from such an approach. Sometimes there can be specific warning failures that fall into the cracks between adequate foreknowledge and appropriate precautionary action, often because policymakers fail to probe each other's position, and adopting the SEES model makes such gaps less likely.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Sir David touched on a few different subjects. First, he stated that it is a mistake trying to pose human rights and national security as a trade-off and that the trade-off is within human rights themselves. Depending on the circumstances, the rights of a few might have to

be infringed to provide protection to the majority. This interference, of course, should be based on reasonable grounds. A democracy operating under the straight Rule of Law can still deliver very impressive successes. Further, Sir David added that the security and intelligence defence community should protect these rights. In the UK, the security services have the obligation to look at subversion, which nowadays includes digital subversion. Therefore, their job is to investigate if there really is something important going on, in which case the government should take action. Although such investigations are very covert and sensitive, they are still subject to independent oversight mechanisms.

Sir David, noted that the UK's parliamentary oversight committee publishes reports, which he thinks are effective, communicating to the public after a terrorist attack what the security services knew and did not know, as well as what is and what is not reasonable to expect from the system. Those reports foster public support and can deal with potential conspiracy thinking that tends to circulate after a terrorist attack takes place. A critical discussion, then, is the consequences of a government's decision to make an intelligence assessment public to justify, for example, additional security measures on a rise in the terrorist threat assessment. Arguably, there is not a safe way in which intelligence assessments can be made public without triggering the media to interpret such action as a way to support the government's actions, which will likely create politicisation.

In any important decision, one must bring together two different kinds of thinking: one is emotionally values driven, and the other is rational analysis. Politicians presenting policies and requesting evidence to support it should be avoided. It is a dangerous line of argument because it may lead to the presentation of evidence that might actually not support a policy or cause it to be modified. Rational policy making is having one's convictions (as a person in authority democratically elected), while also understanding the constraints or boundaries of any analysis.

On the warning nature of intelligence, however, while an assessment does provide a key judgement, it is not a warning. A warning is a proposed act intended to achieve something in which the person being warned realises that something important is happening. Thus, it has to have a claim about the world or a claim about knowing more about the world. It has to answer the question, 'why is that important?' to the person it is trying to warn, which then leads into the policy territory. For example, if there is an international incident, warning intelligence directed to a country that has a stake in it will be very different from that written for a country that has nothing at stake. Therefore, there is a crossing of the

boundary between intelligence and policy implications, which is why in the UK system, for example, having policymakers on the Joint Intelligence Committee arguably improves the credibility of warning intelligence. Paradoxically, however, crossing the intelligence line into the policy territory to become an advocate of a particular point of view, might not be a recommended practice by intelligence analysts.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The primary purpose of intelligence is to enable better decisions by reducing the ignorance of the decision maker regarding situations faced.
- For critical decisions, it is necessary to bring together two things inside a single mind: a) an individual's emotional needs from the decision; b) an individual's rational constraints in making a sensible decision.
- Lesson 1 in intelligence: an individual's knowledge of the world is necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, and sometimes wrong.
- Lesson 2 in intelligence: facts need explaining—even established facts can have different explanations.
- Lesson 3 in intelligence: estimates need sound explanation, adequate data, and explicit assumptions.
- Lesson 4 in intelligence: strategic notice will arguably allow decision makers not to be so surprised by surprises.

Question Period

- It is a mistake trying to pose human rights and national security as a trade off when the trade-off is within human rights themselves.
- Government reports that communicate to the public what the security services knew and did not know after a terrorist attack, as well as what is and what is not reasonable to expect from the system can foster public support and deal with potential conspiracy thinking that tends to circulate after such events take place.
- Rational policy making is having one's convictions, while also understanding the constraints or boundaries of any analysis.
- A warning is a proposed act intended to achieve something in which the person being warned realises that something important is happening. Thus, it has to have a claim about the world or a claim about knowing more about the world.



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