

Cognitive Biases within Intelligence Analysis: Challenges to National Security and Way Forward

HS Wijesinghe#

Faculty of Graduate Studies, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

#hiranthawijesinghe1@gmail.com

Intelligence analysis is a key component in strengthening the national security of any nation. It is also the fundamental step in developing a counter-terrorism strategy. In the counter-terrorism domain, the consequences of a mistake due to an intelligence failure can be catastrophic. Intelligence analysis often results in the presence of weak signals that can be difficult to distinguish. These weak signals are often identified as missed opportunities, which could have provided the Intelligence Community (IC) with opportunities to mitigate the threat. The term “cognitive bias” is used to explain an individual’s systematic but flawed patterns of response to both judgment and decision-making. Intelligence analysis is a complex and difficult undertaking, where cognitive biases impact every judgment and decision whereas the Intelligence Community (IC) needs are aware of the effects of cognitive biases. Therefore, it is vital to examine the effects of cognitive biases on intelligence analysis. It is important to explore potential mitigation strategies which could be employed by the IC to address the effects of cognitive biases. This study explores cognitive bias from a variety of perspectives and confirms that it does affect intelligence analysis and that intelligence analysts must be aware of its effects. It presents a case study from the international context and determines the negative influences of those biases that had an impact on the decisions that were ultimately made in error. The researcher draws lessons from the experience and perceptions of practitioners in the fields of intelligence and psychology. This study concludes by providing policy recommendations to the IC and the Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka that, if followed, will result in significant improvements to the intelligence analysis process.

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