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Perception, Action and Reaction: A Comparative Analysis of Decision-Making Processes in Bilateral Conflicts

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In recent years, the recognition that decision makers in foreign policy act "in accordance with their perception of reality, not in response to reality itself," [1] has permeated the vastly expanding literature on the role of perception in international relations. A common denominator in these studies is the discovery that perception and cognition intervene between the individual decision maker and his objective environment, and therefore the decisions he makes about his environment are subjective.[2] The conclusion that every decision maker in foreign policy operates within the context of psychological predispositions which function as the screen through which external information passes and is assimilated, implies a serious potential for misperception and distortion of incoming stimuli. And indeed, a number of theoretical studies illustrate that, in attempting to fit new data into pre-existing theories and convictions, decision makers might ignore, reinterpret or reconstruct all pieces of information which do not initially conform.[3]

Against this background of mounting preoccupation with perceptions as a determining factor of foreign policy decisions, the present study concentrates on the perception of historical events. Seeking to comprehend the impact which certain recent historical events, or chains of events, had in shaping the perceptions of the present, this article examines whether and to what extent policy makers are predisposed to see the present in the light of the past and to predict the future on this basis, and whether they are liable to treat any partial resemblance between two entities as a whole or exact correspondence.[4]

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[1] Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 12.

[2] Herbert Simon, "Theories of Decision-Making and Behavioral Science," *American Economic Review*, XXXI (June 1959), p. 271; Kenneth E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, III (June 1959), pp. 120-121.

[3] See, for example, Ole R. Holsti, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy: Dulles and Russia," in David J. Finlay, et al., *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), pp. 25-36; and Abraham Ben-Zvi, "American Preconceptions and Policies Toward Japan, 1940-1941," *International Studies Quarterly*, XIX (June 1975), p. 230.

[4] David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 247; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 240.

Specifically, two sets of crises will be juxtaposed. First, American perceptions of Japan's military capabilities and intentions toward the United States during the period preceding the Pearl Harbor attack will be contrasted to the perceptions operating during the final phases of the Pacific War. Then Israeli perceptions of Arab capabilities and intentions on the eve of the Six-Day War of June 1967 will be compared to those prior to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War of October 1973. Thus, the focus of this analysis is on the question of the extent to which the perception of the power relationships with the adversary held by members of the high policy elite changed as a result of the previous encounter.[5] What was the nature of the "learning experience" which American and Israeli policy makers underwent as a result of their involvement in the previous crisis? Was the experience of the prior debacle or triumph perceived as relevant to the new situation at hand? And finally: were the decision makers of the United States and Israel oblivious to the varieties and complexities of the past, to the tentativeness of most historical reconstructions, and to the many hazards associated with claiming that one occurrence is "like" another?[6]

1. THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN: 1941-45

Perceptions prior to the Pacific War

American policy toward Japan during the months preceding Pearl Harbor was not formulated by a single cohesive group of decision makers, but rather it was the outcome of competition among divergent groups enjoying varying degrees of power, which sought conflicting goals and advocated contrary courses of action. However, one group appears to have played a dominant role during most of the "decision games" prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War. This group included Secretary of War (from July 1940) Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and Stanley K. Hornbeck, political adviser to the State Department.[7]

In 1940 and 1941, these American officials advocated a firm, uncompromising policy line toward Japan, strongly supporting the imposition of increasingly comprehensive economic sanctions to deter Japanese expansion toward the south and thereby to reduce the threat of a Pacific

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[5] See, in this connection: David M. Lampton, "The U. S. Image of Peking in Three International Crises," *Western Political Quarterly*, XXIV (March 1973), p. 29.

[6] Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, p. 247. See also, in this connection: Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. xiii; see also Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, XX (April 1968), p. 472; Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 135-139.

[7] Ben-Zvi, "American Preconceptions and Policies," *passim*.

confrontation. They surmised that, impressed by the U. S. firm determination, and deprived of some of her most vital necessities, Japan would yield and succumb to the stick of economic pressure and consequently adopt a more conciliatory policy toward the United States.[8]

In the words of Stimson and Bundy:

> Since 1937, when the Japanese attacked China, Stimson had been urging . . . an embargo on all American trade with Japan, and this attitude he carried with him into the Cabinet. Recognizing the peril of a premature showdown with Japan, he nevertheless believed that the effect of an embargo would be to check and weaken the Japanese, rather than to drive them into open war.[9]

The premise behind the view that "firmness rather than cajolery would be necessary to stay the Japanese hand"[10] was that "the Japanese, however wicked their intentions, would have the good sense not to get involved in war with the United States."[11] Thus it was assumed that Japan was anxious to avoid war at all costs and that, if confronted with a "bold and positive American policy" to cut off supplies of raw materials, she would act in a responsible, restrained manner.

Stimson, Morgenthau and Hornbeck from time to time referred to past experiences to support the premise that only a demonstration of resoluteness on the part of the United States could preserve peace and deter the aggressor. On October 4, 1940, Stimson drafted an "Historical Memorandum as to Japan's Relations with the U. S., which may have a bearing upon the present situation." At a Cabinet meeting of the same day he elaborated:

> In the autumn of 1919, President Wilson got his dander up and put an embargo on all the cotton going to Japan and a boycott on her silk with the result that she crawled down within two months and brought all her troops out from Siberia like whipped puppies.[12]

The implications of the "historical lessons" were clear: Just as economic sanctions proved to be an effective weapon against Japan in 1919, they would again be effective in 1940 and 1941.

[8] Chihiro Hosoya, "Miscalculations in Deterrent Policy: Japanese-U. S. Relations, 1938-41," *Journal of Peace Research*, V (1968), *passim;* Norman A. Graebner, "Hoover, Roosevelt and the Japanese," in Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto (eds.), *Pearl Harbor as History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 42.
[9] Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, Vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 384.
[10] Elting E. Morison, *Turmoil and Tradition: A Study of the Life and Times of Henry L. Stimson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p 522.
[11] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service*, p. 385.
[12] Quoted in Hosoya, "Miscalculations in Deterrent Policy," p. 111. The background of the crisis included an increase in the size of the Japanese expeditionary forces in Siberia in 1918.

Similarly, Morgenthau used to resort to the "lessons of Munich" to justify firmness in the Pacific. Referring to the proposed formulas for a *modus vivendi* agreement between the U. S. and Japan, he observed:

> No matter what explanation is offered to the public of a "truce" with Japan, the American people, the Chinese people, and the oppressed peoples of Europe, as well as those forces in Britain and in Russia who are with us in this fight, will regard it as a confession of American weakness, and vacillation. How else can the world possibly interpret a relaxation of the economic pressure . . . when that relaxation is undertaken not because Japan has actually abandoned [aggression] but only because she promises not to extend her agressive acts to other countries? The parallel with Munich is inescapable.[13]

During the period preceding the Pacific War, then, most American policy makers overlooked the possibility that the enemy was not necessarily guided by a similar train of thought. Unable to supersede the cultural boundaries separating them from the conceptual world of their opponent, they strongly believed that in light of the disparity in military capabilities between Japan and the U. S. (which they greatly exaggerated), the Japanese would decide whether or not to attack the U. S. on a strictly rational basis—and consequently would not favor war. Ignorance of the psychology of the Japanese people (and especially of middle echelon officers) prevented them from perceiving the Japanese predisposition, at crucial moments, to give priority to nationalistic, ideological and psychological factors over purely military ones, and consequently to make high-risk decisions:

> The economic sanctions, rather than serving as a 'deterrent to a southern advance,' produced precisely the opposite effect. . . . A complete embargo, rather than resulting in Japan's submission, carried with it the danger of driving Japan to a military advance into the south in spite of the resulting possibility of a war with the U. S. . . . The enforcement of . . . economic sanctions thus turned out to stiffen the attitude of the middle echelon officers and provoked them to execute the plan for a southern advance. . . . The oil embargo also caused the middle echelon officers in the Army to move toward favoring going quickly to war with the U. S.[14]

[13] This quotation is cited from a draft of a personal letter to the President, which Morgenthau never sent. As the various schemes for a *modus vivendi* did not lead to an agreement, there was no need for Morgenthau to send his letter warning against such a truce. See: Morgenthau's letter (undated), pp. 1-2, in Henry Morgenthau's Diary, Book 4, March-December 31, 1941, Roosevelt Library.

[14] Hosoya, "Miscalculations in Deterrent Policy," p. 111.

Committed to its preconceived "rational" model of the adversary's behavior, the group of "hard liners" discounted the spate of messages sent by the American Ambassador in Toyko, Joseph Grew, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, warning against the assumption that continued economic sanctions would automatically force Japan into adopting a restrained policy the U. S. Similarly Stimson, Morgenthau and Hornbeck remained oblivious to the bulk of intercepted messages originating in Tokyo in November 1941, which indicated that the Japanese were about to launch a southeastern campaign during the weekend of November 30 or the weekend of December 7. Once the last-ditch attempt to bring the Hull-Nomura conversations to a successful conclusion was found "to be in vain" (following the uncompromising "Ten Point Plan" which Secretary of State Cordell Hull submitted to the Japanese Ambassador in Washington, Kichisaburo Nomura on November 26), it became clear from these intercepted messages that war with the United States (or with Britain) was indeed imminent. Indeed, the plethora of messages originating in Tokyo after November 26 made clear that Japan had finally abandoned the political option, but that it wished to deceive the United States into believing that it still desired the diplomatic dialogue to continue.[15]

Despite the mounting reliable warning signals, several U. S. policy makers remained, almost to the very end, committed to their belief that Japan would not dare to directly challenge the U. S. in the Pacific. (It was expected that Japan would strike at a British, Dutch or French target in the Pacific, but would refrain from attacking American territory.) Thus when John Emmerson (a junior embassy officer in Tokyo) warned the State Department that Japan might launch an attack out of sheer desperation, he was rebuked by Hornbeck who replied: "Tell me of one case in history when a nation went to war out of desperation." [16]

In conjunction with their tendency to overestimate their own military capabilities, members of Washington's high policy elite were predisposed, through much of the 1930's, to underestimate Japan's military capabilities as well as production capacity:

> Too often American observers of the Japanese army saw only the
> stereotypes they had carried in their heads from the United States,
> not the real Japanese army. Japanese bayonet training, for example,
> was reported to be merely an adaptation of traditional Japanese

[15] Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 200.

[16] Quoted in Chihiro Hosoya, "Characteristics of the Foreign Policy Decision-Making System in Japan," *World Politics*, XXVI (April 1974), p. 353.

techniques of the sword and therefore surely unsuited for combat against Western armies.[17]

In conclusion, during the period preceding the outbreak of the Pacific War, most U. S. policy makers remained oblivious to the asymetry of motivation that existed between themselves and the Japanese leaders. As a result, they failed to perceive the possibility that their opponent (whose military capabilities were consistently underestimated), might be willing to accept greater costs and risks than expected.[18]

Perceptions during the last phase of the Pacific War

Whereas Henry Morgenthau lost his easy access to the White House following the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945 and was soon allowed to retire,[19] Henry Sitmson, who shared his conceptions of Japan in 1940 and 1941, was retained in his position as Secretary of War in President Truman's new Cabinet.

Among the areas which Stimson considered essential to the security of the U. S. in 1945 was the Pacific Ocean, including those Pacific islands captured from Japan. Hoping that the Soviet Union would not interfere with this network scheme, but rather act as a stabilizing force in the Pacific, he envisaged no postwar role for Japan in the region.[20] Instead, the notion that Japan was an "absolute enemy" dominated his thinking. Evidently, the traumatic failure of Stimson's deterrent strategy of 1941 [21] fundamentally shattered his perception of Japanese policy makers as rational statesmen, whose decisions and actions were guided by realistic calculations. Oversimplifying and exaggerating the "lessons" of Pearl Harbor, he advocated, during the closing stages of the Pacific War, policies which sharply and fundamentally differed from those he recommended forty months earlier.[22]

That Stimson's image of Japan had undergone a profound change following the outbreak of war is evidenced by his perceptions of the magnitude and scope of the Japanese threat to the Western Hemisphere in

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[17] Russell F. Weighley, "The Role of the War Department and the Army," *Pearl Harbor as History,* p. 186.

[18] Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor,* p. 354; Abraham Ben-Zvi, "Hindsight and Foresight: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Surprise Attacks," *World Politics,* XXVIII (April 1976), p. 394.

[19] May, *"Lessons" of the Past,* p. 20.

[20] Akira Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 99.

[21] Alexander L. George, David K. Hall and William E. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 245. See also, in this connection, Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," p. 470.

[22] See, in this connection: Saadia Touval, *Domestic Dynamics of Change from Confrontation to Accommodation Policies,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 17; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception,* pp. 271-308.

1942. Greatly overrating Japan's military capabilities and propensity to take high-risk decisions, he was "principally interested in the Panama Canal," which he considered a likely target for a Japanese strike.[23] The same proclivity to overestimate Japanese capabilities as well as determination to fight to the very end was clearly manifested in July 1945, when Stimson assumed that "there was a strong possibility that the Japanese Government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all the areas of the Far East under its control." [24] In such an event," he surmised, "the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race which had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death." [25] In the words of a memorandum Stimson submitted to the President on July 2, 1945:

> If we once land on one of the main islands and begin a forceful occupation of Japan, we shall probably have cast the die of last-ditch resistance. The Japanese are highly patriotic and certainly susceptible to calls for fanatical resistance to repel an invasion. Once started in actual invasion, we shall in my opinion have to go through with an even more bitter finish fight than in Germany.[26]

This radical change in Stimson's perception of Japanese intentions was of the utmost importance as it led him to advocate the use of the recently developed atomic bomb as a means for ending the war quickly, thereby preventing a "very long, costly and arduous struggle," [27] which would have followed the planned landing in Kyushu:

> I felt that to extract a genuine surrender from the Emperor and his military advisers, they must be administered a tremendous shock which would carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the Empire. Such an effective shock would save many times the number of lives, both American and Japanese, than it would cost.[28]

Considered irrational and recalcitrant, "the Japanese ruling oligarchy" [29] was not expected to be impressed either by a display of the atomic bomb, or by an explicit ultimatum divulging the nature of the new weapon. Thus, the actual deployment of the bomb had become, in Stimson's eyes, the only possible means to bring the war to a rapid close. Since the

[23] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service*, Vol. II, p. 406.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 618.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 621.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 620.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 617. See also: Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 47.
[29] Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service*, p. 625.

planned invasion was perceived as too costly and the demonstration of atomic energy ineffective, Stimson felt that a "most dramatic and shocking disclosure of the new force" was needed. "Any other course," he reasoned, "involved serious danger to the major objective of obtaining a prompt surrender from the Japanese." [30] As Morison points out ". . . taking all things together it is reasonable to suppose that the Secretary of War was, *in the first months of 1945*, acting within a developing assumption that the bomb would be used." [31]

Faced with conflicting military evaluations, Stimson assimilated those bits of information which coincided with and supported his preconceived notions. Therefore, in defiance of the assessments included in the Strategic Bombing Survey, which predicted that Japan would "in all probability" surrender prior to November 1, 1945,[32] he expected fanatical and fierce Japanese resistance to last until the late fall of 1946.[33]

Concurrently, the Secretary of War did not attach much importance to the available evidence which, in the spring and early summer of 1945, indicated that the Emperor and other Japanese leaders were actively seeking a way to end the fighting. By early July, the U. S. had intercepted messages between Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo and the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow, Naotake Sato, which showed that the Emperor had taken a personal hand in the matter and had directed that the Soviet Union be asked to help terminate the war.[34] As Togo advised Sato on July 12,

> His Majesty is extremely anxious to terminate the war as soon as possible. . . . Our government therefore desires to negotiate for a speedy restoration of peace. . . . For this purpose Prince Konoye will proceed to Moscow with a personal message from the Emperor and it is requested that the Soviet Government kindly provide him with travel facilities.[35]

The diary of Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, provides a clear illustration of the extent of the information available in Washington in

[30] Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Vintage Press, 1965), p. 116.

[31] Morison, *Turmoil and Tradition*, p. 629.

[32] Hanson W. Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War* (London: Alvin Redman, 1950), p. 91.

[33] Feis, *The Atomic Bomb*, p. 70. See also, in this connection: Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, p. 108; Louis Morton, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, XXXV (January 1957), p. 339.

[34] Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, p. 108. Morton, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," pp. 343-344.

[35] Quoted in John Toland, *The Rising Sun* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 757-758. See also: Robert J. S. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), p. 130. Konoye's visit to Moscow never took place as a result of Soviet procrastination and eventual declaration of war on Japan.

July regarding the Emperor's strong desire to bring the Pacific War to a speedy end:

> Messages today [July 15] on Japanese-Russian conversations. Togo, Foreign Minister, insisted that Sato present to Molotov the request of the Emperor himself. Sato's replies insistingly pointed out the lack of reality in Togo's apparent belief that there is a chance of persuading Russia to take independent action on the Eastern war. He stated very bluntly and without any coating how fantastic is the hope that Russia would be impressed by Japanese willingness to give up territory which she had already lost. . . . Throughout Sato's message ran a note of cold and realistic evaluation of Japan's position; and he said that the situation was rapidly passing beyond the point of Japan's and Russia's cooperating in the security of Asia but [that the question was] rather whether there would be any Manchukuo or even Japan itself left as entities. The gist of his final message was that it was clear that Japan was thoroughly and completely defeated and that the only course open was quick and definite action recognizing such fact. . . .[36]

The mere fact that the Japanese had approached the Soviet Union with a request for mediation (combined with the continuous efforts of several Japanese diplomats in Berne and Stockholm to establish channels of communications with the American OSS organization in Europe) should have suggested the possibility that, for all her talk about "death to the last man," Japan might have accepted the Allied demand for unconditional surrender:

> . . . if only it were couched in more specific terms than those which Washington was already using to define its meannig. . . . What Japan needed was a *positive*, not a negative, definition of terms, with special emphasis, of course, on the future of Japan's imperial house.[37]

No such definitions, however, were forthcoming. Indeed, none of the bits of reliable information about the peace feelers could convince members of the high policy elite to reexamine their convictions.[38] Stimson

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[36] Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 75.

[37] Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, p. 134 (italics Butow's). See also Toshikozu Kase, *Journey to the Missouri* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 193.

[38] Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War*, p. 90. See also, in this connection, Morton, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," p. 343; and Toland, *The Rising Sun*, p. 770. According to Toland, in late July "the American leaders, now in possession of the ultimate weapon, were already determined to accept nothing short of unconditional surrender, and were no longer capable of considering negotiations even as the most peace-minded Japanese saw them" (p. 770).

therefore remained firm in his belief that the Japanese approach to Moscow was ". . . no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight rather than accept unconditional surrender," [39] and that the purpose of the desperate Japanese pleas for Soviet mediation "were aimed at retaining important conquered areas." [40] Greatly overestimating Japan's military capabilities and will to fight,[41] he was afraid lest any softening in the surrender terms be interpreted by "at least some of Japan's leaders . . . as the first proof of that American fatigue which [Japanese militarists] had been predicting since 1941." [42]

In conclusion, there can be little doubt that the lessons derived from the trauma of Pearl Harbor and from the apparent bankruptcy of the dominant prewar perception of the Japanese "operational code" led Stimson to adopt, in 1945, a posture derived from a fundamentally different premise. Adhering to clear-cut, sharply delineated and dichotomous views, he was thus unable to anticipate either the possibility that in 1941 the Japanese might make "an all-out, do-or-die attempt, actually risking Hara-Kiri, to make Japan impervious to economic embargoes abroad, rather than yield to foreign pressures," or the possibility that Japan might, in 1945, prefer surrender to utter destruction (assuming that the Imperial House would be preserved).

2. THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: 1967-1973

Israeli perceptions on the eve of the Six-Day War, 1967

An examination of the predominant Israeli perceptions of the opponent on the eve of the Six-Day War of June 1967, indicates that these were shaped by the memory and impact of an acute national trauma, namely the destruction of European Jewry during the Second World War. Whereas the "hard-liners" had remained oblivious, throughout the fall of 1941, to the danger of a direct Japanese attack on American territory, Israeli policy makers tended to view the unfolding crisis of May 1967 with utmost concern, fearing that it might escalate and hence pose a threat to the very existence of their state.

In analyzing the predominant images which, with varying degrees of intensity, affected the actions of such Israeli decision makers as Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Foreign Minister Abba Eban and Minister of Transportation Moshe Carmel during the crisis preceding the outbreak

39 Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender,* pp. 130-131.

40 *Ibid,* p. 130.

41 See, in this connection, Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War,* p. 94. For additional evidence see: William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), p. 384; Ernest J. King and Walter M. Whitehall, *Fleet Admiral King* (London: Eyre & Spottiswode, 1953), p. 593.

42 Stimson and Bundy, *On Active Service,* Vol. II, p. 638.

of the Six-Day War, it is evident that a clear, coherent and extremely menacing perception of threat permeated their thinking and shaped their decisions. This vision of threat, which called for vigilance, incorporated perceptions of the enemy's capabilities as well as intentions. Thus, the enemy was believed to be considering aggressive actions, and to be capable of carrying them out.

Unlike the situation on the eve of Pearl Harbor, when American policy makers assumed that considerations of "capabilities" would be paramount in the thinking of Japan's high policy elite, overshadowing any wish or intention to retaliate against American pressures, Israeli policy makers in 1967 were impressed with both Arab capabilities and the seriousness of their intentions. Thus, whereas Japanese intentions to attack, despite inadequate capabilities to do so, were perceived as purely hypothetical, the Egyptian actions of May 1967 convinced Israeli policy makers that Arab intentions to destroy Israel could well determine their behavior. As Moshe Carmel, Minister of Transportation in the 1967 Cabinet, recalls:

> . . . one can state definitely that the moves of the Egyptian enemy in mid and late May . . . caused deep forebodings about the well-being, security and existence of the State. When I recreate before my eyes those fateful meetings and many discussions of the Government . . . with all their forebodings, their hesitations and soul-searching—I have no doubts that everybody saw the ring closing before his eyes and the approaching danger to our unstable well-being, our security and our existence as a free people. In the discussions we had, the words "danger of destruction" did not pass our lips, just as we did not express them in any of the critical periods during the past 25 years, not even during more critical periods than those preceding the Six-Day War. No one may have expressed the fateful phrase "danger of destruction." Those words were there in the air, even if they were not specifically uttered.[43]

The crisis of May 1967 was not perceived by Israeli political leaders as an isolated phenomenon, which could be dealt with on its own merits. Instead, the chain of events unfolding between May 16 and May 22 brought to the fore an entire complex of deep-rooted attitudes and feelings which can be labelled as the "holocaust syndrome"—the fear that the survival of Israel was threatened.[44] Viewing themselves as the

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[43] Quoted in Benjamin Geist, "A Question of Survival," *International Journal*, XXVIII (Autumn 1973), pp. 634-635.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 638. David Danieli, "The Memory of the Holocaust as a Factor in Crisis" (Unpublished seminar paper, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1973) [Hebrew], *passim*. See also Brecher's incisive analysis in: Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 333.

guardians of the Jewish people at large, and particularly of the survivors of the holocaust, members of Israel's high policy elite were acutely sensitive to any threat, however minor, to the security and well-being of their state.[45] Living and operating under the searing impact and shadow of the destruction of European Jewry, which was further reinforced by the long and bitterly fought war of 1948, they adopted the logic inherent in the concept of "worst case analysis" as a guideline. With the memory of a complacent and incredulous world—incapable of grasping the true and full meaning of Hitler's threats against the Jewish people—still fresh in their minds, Israeli leaders were determined to prevent a second national catastrophe in their time, and were thus predisposed to take no risks when questions of security arose.

This predisposition to apply to the Arab-Israeli conflict the lessons drawn from the traumatic experience of the Second World War, and consequently to regard any Arab threat as a threat of total annihilation, was readily acknowledged by several decision makers well before the crisis leading up to the outbreak of war in 1967. For example, in 1956, Shimon Peres (then Director-General of the Ministry of Defense) stated that:

> We, members of the Jewish people, have suffered more than any other nation has [during Second World War] and are, therefore, acutely sensitive to the appearance of even small Hitlers. It is true that Egypt is not Germany and Nasser is not Hitler. Nevertheless, the similarity is greater than the difference.[46]

Similarly, on August 26, 1963, Prime Minister Eshkol observed that "we should not overlook the threats facing us. . . . The danger surrounding the State is that of total destruction." [47]

On the eve of the Six-Day War and in the face of an explicit Arab threat, these floating and sometimes latent feelings and predispositions, derived from the nation's recent cumulative historical legacy, surfaced with such vigor and magnitude as to make the analogy with the extermination of European Jewry in the Second World War inescapable.

Even on those occasions where decision makers did not directly and explicitly resort to the holocaust analogy, it is clear that they operated under its deep and indelible imprint. Perceiving danger in the stark terms of physical survival, they envisaged defeat as total and complete destruction.

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[45] Geist, "A Question of Survival," p. 638.
[46] Danieli, "The Memory of the Holocaust," p. 16.
[47] Ibid.

Indeed, so pervasive and all-encompassing was the issue of survival in May-June 1967, that it overshadowed any deviant assessments of the magnitude of the threat. Specifically, it led Israeli leaders to discount the evaluations and convictions of the military elite (based strictly on an assessment of the military balance of power) according to which Israel was expected to win any military struggle quickly and decisively. Thus, whereas the Army's perspective and frame of reference was focused on the events as they unfolded during May 1967 (and as they affected the military balance of power), Israeli policy makers approached the crisis with far wider perspective. Clinging to their menacing vision, they remained oblivious to the reports and evaluations of the Army's high command—which challenged the notion that Israel was confronted with a danger of destruction.

As the then Deputy Chief of Staff, Haim Bar-Lev, has observed in retrospect:

> No, there was no danger of destruction on the eve of the Six-Day War, and we [i.e., the military] did not speak or think in such terms. This danger existed only in the War of Independence and it became clear very quickly that, actually, even then, this danger was not serious.[48]

The optimism which characterized the thinking of the military elite never permeated Israel's high policy elite. Nor did it bring about any questioning of the validity of the convictions to which the high policy elite tenaciously adhered on the eve of war. Clinging to its preconceived notions, this elite drew upon the holocaust analogy as the core of its "operational code" and as the impetus for vigilance and irreconcilability.

Perceptions on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, 1973

On the eve of the Yom Kippur war of October 1973, the overall impact of the 1967 war dominated strategic thinking in Israel, overshadowing any deficiencies or weaknesses manifest during the earlier confrontation, or during the subsequent "War of Attrition." So swift and unequivocal was Israel's 1967 victory then, that it had become the model on which future military operations were planned and anticipated. As such, the Six-Day War had provided an analogy which was later applied "too quickly, easily and widely." [49]

Thus, the magnitude of victory in 1967 was the factor which obfuscated and diminished the painful memories of the holocaust. Deeply impressed by the performance of the Israeli Army during that war, Israeli policy

[48] Geist, "A Question of Survival," p. 641.
[49] See, in this connection, Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p. 220.

makers (most of whom belonged to the group which made decisions in 1967) realized that they may well have overestimated the magnitude and significance of the Arab threat in 1967. With the "holocaust syndrome" fading into the background, a new and seemingly more "rational" perception of the opponent emerged. It was thus assumed that, in light of the Egyptian debacle in 1967 and later developments which further weakened Egyptian military capability (e.g., the expulsion of Soviet military advisers from Egypt in July 1972), any Egyptian decision to wage war would now be based primarily on military consideration rather than on nationalistic, ideological or psychological ones. This conviction that considerations pertaining to military capabilities alone would dictate the opponent's decision to wage war against Israel was clearly expressed by Defense Minister Dayan on June 17, 1973:

> As long as there exists an Arab threat, we ought to be ready to fight, but it appears to me that more and more they will come to realize that they are not going to gain much by waging war. . . . Our overall position is much better than in 1967. . . . The past six years have fundamentally altered our military situation. The prospect that the Arabs will wage war appears slim to us . . . but even if war would break out, we do not believe this would mean a disaster. On the contrary, if they were to launch an attack—they would be crushed.[50]

Overlooking the possibility that their adversaries did not necessarily follow the same line of reasoning, Israel's decision makers remained unaware of the fact that defeat had not generated a desire for peace on the part of the Arab leaders, but rather a lust for revenge.

Believing the Arabs to have no military option at all, they assumed that "there was no logic or rationality whatsoever in believing that Egypt could secure any successes, total or partial, by military action."[51] In Perlmutter's words: "Israeli policy makers failed to perceive the willingness of the Egyptian and Syrian leaders to accept high levels of damage in order to change the political status quo the government of Israel seemed unprepared to alter."[52]

In the period preceding the Yom Kippur War, these "rational" assumptions were integrated into Israel's political-national security doctrine. This doctrine presumed that neither Egypt nor Syria would resort to war against Israel without air superiority, or at least without having

[50] Quoted in Ma'ariv (Hebrew), June 18, 1973.
[51] The Agranat Report (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), pp. 19-20.
[52] Amos Perlmutter, "Israel's Fourth War, October 1973: Political and Military Misperceptions," Orbis, XIX (Summer 1975), p. 446.

enough air power to support her military operations. Since Israel esti-mated it could maintain its perceived air superiority into the mid-seven-ties, war was not expected to break out until then.

The conviction implicit in this doctrine that beaten once by the heat of their emotions, Arab leaders would subsequently exhibit caution and restraint and thus avoid risks or actions not guided by scrupulous assess-ments of the military balance of power—affected the Israeli interpreta-tion of intelligence gathered on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. During the week preceding the war, Israeli intelligence officers of the Southern and Northern Commands amassed credible information indicating an impending attack.

On October 1, for example, intelligence headquarters of the South-ern Command received a large number of reports indicating unusual Egyptian activity along the Suez Canal. On the same day, a lower echelon intelligence officer in the Southern Command submitted to his Chief Intelligence Officer a memorandum entitled "Activities of the Egyptian Armed Forces—The Possibility of Renewal of War." Two days later, the same officer presented another memorandum, emphasizing the high probability that the Egyptian maneuvers were a mere cover for an impending attack. Furthermore, on October 4 aerial photographs revealed the deployment of equipment necessary for crossing the Canal, as well as massive embankments along the waterway.[53] It was also learned that an operation to evacuate Soviet advisers from Egypt and Syria had begun on October 3 and was proceeding apace.

Nevertheless, up to the very eve of war, the accumulated data did not affect the strategic thinking of Israel's decision makers. Despite this tactical evidence, Israeli policy makers remained committed to their belief that Egypt and Syria would avoid a direct challenge, that Israel's borders constituted an effective deterrent against a would-be aggressor, and that a process of reconciliation rather than war was eventually destined to evolve.

As in the case of American preconceptions on the eve of Pearl Harbor, the capability of the enemy to translate impending threats into action was not properly assessed. In both cases, while the atmosphere on ongoing hostility and tensions indicated serious intentions to attack, it was expected that the opponent would not resort to war.

Unlike their predisposition in 1967 to overestimate the opponent's capabilities, and unlike their profound concern that the survival of the State was at stake, Israeli decision makers in 1973 watched the un-

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[53] Ben-Zvi, "Hindsight and Foresight," p. 393; Zeev Schiff, *October Earthquake—Yom Kippur 1973* (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1974), pp. 27-28.

precedented deployment of enemy troops along the front with unwavering confidence.

Thus there is no trace of fear for the survival of his country in Foreign Minister's Eban's speech to the General Assembly on October 3, 1973:

> The international climate is charged with confidence and hope. Whatever had divided them in the past, the Israeli and Arab nations cannot escape their common destiny. History and geography ensure their proximity. Experience teaches us that there are no irreconcilable conflicts. If the Arab Governments will take example and inspiration from the prevailing spirit of detente they will find in Israel a willing partner for regional development and cooperation.[54]

To be sure, several Israeli policy makers at the time did refer to the possibility that the Arabs would resort to the military operation. However, in most statements the threat of war was not perceived as imminent or concretely formulated. Rather, it appeared to be an abstract, theoretical contingency, which was not expected to dictate short-range Arab behavior toward Israel.

Whereas in 1967 threat was perceived in terms of the physical survival of the State, in 1973 the notion of "threat" connoted primarily political pressure or, at most, limited and intermittent military action. For example, Israel Galili (Minister without Portfolio) on April 12, 1973, declared that "the danger confronting us is in the attempt to deprive us, by means of political actions and occasional military pressure, of the vital advantages secured . . . following the Six-Day War."[55] Since full-scale war was considered to be only a remote hypothetical possibility, there was little need for vigilance even in the face of tactical evidence indicating imminent danger.

Clearly, the possibility of the Arabs' launching full-scale attack was not perceived as viable until the very eve of war. Instead, it was assumed that, impressed by Israel's superior military capability, Egypt would recognize the futility of war and would ultimately adopt a more conciliatory posture toward settling the Arab-Israeli conflict—a posture reflecting the spirit of detente, which was believed to have permeated the international environment.

Indeed, with the lessening of rivalry between the superpowers, it was expected that hostility between Israel and the Arabs would also subside. The spirit of detente, Israeli policy makers surmised, would frustrate

[54] Quoted in: *Israel Policy Statements* (Jerusalem: November 14, 1973), pp. 1, 15.
[55] Quoted in Abraham Ben-Zvi, "A Comparative Analysis of Four Cases of Surprise," *International Problems* (Hebrew), XV (Autumn 1975), p. 22.

Arab political and military ambitions and induce an agreement with Israel on terms advantageous to the latter.[56]

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of American and Israeli perceptions of the opponent indicates, first, that decision makers in foreign policy act in accordance with their *perceptions* of reality, not in response to reality itself, and are frequently predisposed to misconstrue, distort and deviate from the reality of the environment within which they must act. Secondly, the analysis demonstrates that events of great magnitude—which can be neither ignored nor assimilated into established belief systems—push individuals toward major cognitive reorganization.[57] By virtue of their importance, dramatic context and proximity, such events clearly expose the fallacies inherent in the original perception, and "trigger" decision makers to adopt the antithesis of their original conceptions.[58]

Indeed, American policy makers reacted to the trauma of Pearl Harbor by adopting a view which in essence contradicted their prewar vision of Japan. Similarly, Israeli decision makers, intoxicated by an unexpected, overwhelming victory, ultimately abandoned their original and greatly threatening image of their opponent, and became complacent and over-confident in the face of the approaching Arab onslaught.

So dramatic and drastic were these "trigger events" that they fostered dichotomic thinking and encouraged the drawing of oversimplified lessons and sweeping generalizations. Thus, after Pearl Harbor, American leaders abandoned their visions of the Japanese political elite as a body susceptible to reason, adopting instead an equally simplistic notion of the Japanese leadership as totally irrational and unaboundedly fanatical. Moving in an opposite direction, Israeli leaders shifted from the extreme of insecurity and pessimism to the extreme of overconfidence and un-bounded optimism.

The predisposition of both American and Israeli policy makers to break away from previous preconceptions which were proven erroneous, could not in itself guarantee that the gap separating perception from reality was to be bridged. Indeed, as the foregoing analysis has indicated, breaking away too sharply from past misperceptions can prove as harmful as clinging to those original notions.

[56] Michael I. Handel, *Perception, Deception and Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Papers on Peace Problems, 1976), pp. 17-18.
[57] See, in this connection, Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," pp. 465-466; Jervis. *Perception and Misperception,* p. 271.
[58] See, in this connection, Touval, *Domestic Dynamics of Change,* p. 17. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception,* p. 271.