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Assumptionitis in Strategy

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Mie Augier, Sean F. X. Barrett, and William Mullen

“WE HAVE LIVED TOO LONG IN A STRATEGY-FREE MODE.” – JAMES N. MATTIS[1]

ASSUMPTIONS AND STRATEGY

Former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis identified a lack of strategy and strategic thinking in the United States’ national security policy discourse. This problem is complex, multifaceted, and caused by a number of factors, including a lack of understanding of what strategy is, and is not, and how to educate strategists, an inability or unwillingness to identify and understand core strategic issues, the tyranny of the present, and a fickle public. This article alleviates some of the challenges of living in a strategy-free mode by focusing on the development of strategic thinking and strategies that are based on empirically realistic assumptions consistent with decision making and behavior in the real world. Relying on assumptions, both implicit and explicit, that are false, unrealistic, or assume away the difficult parts of problems results in what might be called “assumptionitis.”[2]

Assumptionitis undermines useful strategic analysis, much less policy recommendations, because it is unlikely the real world will unfold in ways consistent with this kind of analysis. Optimistic assumptions regarding the reaction of the Iraqi people and the conditions that would prevail following the 2003 invasion, for example, crippled the effort to effectively plan for, and cope with, post-invasion Iraq.[3] There is no easy cure for assumptionitis, but empirically-grounded, interdisciplinary thinking can make our assumptions more realistic and, thus, strategies more meaningful.

EXAMPLES OF ASSUMPTIONITIS

Strategy is a process of identifying, creating, and exploiting asymmetries to develop long-term competitive advantages. Strategy, by its nature, involves multiple, and often overlapping, steps, including thinking about creative ways to identify and exploit asymmetries, understanding and analyzing trends in the changing strategic environment, and integrating and synthesizing information to lead, shape, and manage strategic changes in our organizations in order to implement strategy. Given the dynamism inherent in today's geostrategic environment, strategy must be both deliberate and emergent to facilitate strategic management and learning, respectively.[4] This entails basing strategy on the world as it is so that it is useful for practical action.

Assumptions are key to getting strategy right, but they are oftentimes flawed, unrealistic, and difficult to change because strategists tend to view the world based on what is familiar to them. Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara described this phenomenon: "We see what we want to believe." [5] Entrenched beliefs prevent cognitive agility and seeing the need for conceptualizing the world in different ways. This is particularly damaging in a world that is changing quickly and in often unpredictable ways. The increasing and overwhelming amount of information available only compounds this problem. As Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon noted, "[A] wealth of information creates a poverty of attention," which makes critical and strategic thinking even more important.[6]

Academic disciplines and textbooks can exacerbate the tendency for making erroneous assumptions by approaching decision making, including strategic decision making, from the point of view of just one or two disciplines rather than starting with the empirical behavior of humans. Kahn and Mann warn, "[M]any analysts do become enamored of intellectual and mechanical gadgets . . . They are easily seduced into emphasizing the use of such tools rather than focusing attention on the real problems." [7] This tendency manifests itself especially in the mistaken assumption of unbounded human rationality.[8] Noticing the need for a more realistic conception of humans, Simon, a pioneer in the fields of behavioral economics and artificial intelligence, observed, "Nothing is more fundamental in setting our research agenda and informing our research methods than our view of the nature of the human being whose behavior we are studying." [9] Thus, strategic thinking and analysis begins with an understanding of human nature and the limits to rationality, even if—or, perhaps, especially if—it challenges favorite tools and models.

Assumptionitis sets in when one set of actors project their own objectives and values onto others. One problem with the Rational Man perspective—or any other theory that assumes homogeneity across preferences, cultures, and countries; is that it does not always happen that people invest the time to try to understand where others, e.g., countries, cultures, are coming from. As a result, one set of actors assumes that others have the same objectives as themselves even though two groups rarely agree on what is rational. This approach to forming assumptions about an opponent's decisions or actions is a poor foundation upon which to build strategic thinking and planning. It can, for instance, lead to neglecting the nuances in how countries view national power, which influences their strategic objectives, how their strategic fears may influence what they do, and the operational code behind their decision making.[10] Additionally, when homogeneity is assumed and static tools and models are applied to a changing environment, another deleterious assumption occurs: that the enemy is static and is not also trying to enact countermeasures and identify competitive advantages to exploit.[11]

STRATEGY IS NOT SIMPLY PRECONCEIVED AND CRAFTED THROUGH A DELIBERATE PROCESS, BUT ALSO EMERGES FROM PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR THAT DEVELOP AND REQUIRE INTERVENTION TO FACILITATE LEARNING AND ADAPTATION WHEN APPROPRIATE.

A result of assuming homogeneity in rationality and objectives is difficulty in forecasting future security environments or conflicts. In a speech to the cadets at West Point, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed, “[W]hen it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right.”[12] To identify and understand future conflicts, we must first look at the world as it is, understand trends and how they can lead to asymmetries, and understand others through their own eyes and perspectives as opposed to through our own. Otherwise, all things are sudden and confusing to the willfully blind. Leaders must detect emerging patterns and strategies in their own organizations as well. Strategy is not simply preconceived and crafted through a deliberate process, but also emerges from patterns of behavior that develop and require intervention to facilitate learning and adaptation when appropriate.[13]

Another symptom of assumptionitis includes adopting a form of linear thinking in our views of organizations. Assumptionitis manifests itself in assuming strategy implementation is automatic and that once started, a plan or policy progresses smoothly toward the desired end state. This, however, is rarely the case due to many factors, such as bureaucratic and organizational inertias, that create friction and inhibit the smooth functioning of strategic implementation. In his memoirs, Secretary Gates, for example, lamented how the most important wars he fought were the internal organizational and bureaucratic ones.[14]

INTERDISCIPLINARY AND PROBLEM-DRIVEN APPROACHES FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, NOT ON THE TECHNOLOGIES, THEORIES, MODELS, OR TEXTBOOK ANALYSES WE PREFER.

Assumptions about the future based on extrapolating relative-success in the past, and based on a short-term horizon can be dangerous. The past is of course important to crafting strategy, which Mintzberg offers “requires a natural synthesis of the future, present, and past.”[15] However, it’s also crucial to be “attuned to existing patterns [and] able to perceive important breaks in them.”[16] A myopic focus on the next news or election cycle undermines a strategic mindset and underscores the importance of establishing broad strategic objectives to serve as guideposts. In the absence of such guideposts, Secretary Schlesinger warns, “[O]ur policies will be determined by impulse and image.”[17] He says that the U.S. can only succeed “if we are sufficiently disciplined to select those tasks, few in number, that truly involve the longer-term interests of this society—and avoid becoming sidetracked by the many lesser tasks (brought to our attention by an enterprising news industry) that would exhaust the patience of the American public.”[18]

OVERCOMING ASSUMPTIONITIS WITH EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED, INTERDISCIPLINARY THINKING

There is no easy fix for assumptionitis. However, there are some approaches and ideas that can help mitigate making assumptions that lead us to misguided policy that is difficult, if not impossible, to implement—or worse, lead us in unproductive, perhaps even dangerous, directions. In particular, we suggest the following can improve our understanding and practice of strategy:

- Interdisciplinary and problem-driven approaches focus on the problem, not on the technologies, theories, models, or textbook analyses we prefer. The U.S. Air Force, for example, uses the “Kessel Run” approach in which they assemble a team of recognized experts in various disciplines to dive deeply on a challenge to identify and truly understand its nature before determining what they should try to do about it. This approach can be employed at the strategic level as well, but the people involved should not be the daily decision-makers. Expecting already busy people to perform this type of analysis is unrealistic. Furthermore, expecting this type of analysis to be done quickly—e.g., within a given news cycle—would further complicate and likely undermine the effort. Patience is key to getting it right. Organizationally, General David H. Berger’s desire to establish a strategic thinking capability for the U.S. Marine Corps is another potentially useful step in this direction that other organizations could benefit from as well.[19]

THINKING CRITICALLY REQUIRES STUDENT-CENTERED, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING, NOT ROTE MEMORIZATION OF MATERIALS AND IDEAS PASSIVELY ABSORBED FROM INSTRUCTORS AND TEXTBOOKS.

- Interdisciplinary does not mean simply applying one’s favorite theory, model, or technology to multiple different domains, areas, or data sets. Rather, strategic analysis needs to be rooted in real world problems that are understood through multiple lenses and constantly evolving interdisciplinary frameworks, not static theories. As such, engaging in active open-mindedness and seeking to truly understand the problem by viewing it from different vantage points and trying to disprove our hypotheses would prove useful and mitigate our penchant for locking in on a pet theory and trying to make the problem fit the theory. Broad, holistic thinking about strategy might

mitigate some of the trained incapacity for strategic thinking when siloed away in particular academic disciplines. Mintzberg, for example, notes that while strategic planning is analytic in nature, “strategy creation is essentially a process of synthesis.”[20]

- Active minds capable of holistic, interdisciplinary thinking are best developed using active learning approaches. Instead of teaching people what to think, the emphasis needs to be placed on teaching how to think critically about the world around us. Thinking critically requires student-centered, transformational learning, not rote memorization of materials and ideas passively absorbed from instructors and textbooks.
- Identifying and articulating strategic interests or guideposts can foster a longer view of challenges. British statesman and Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, for example, famously explained, “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”[21] Secretary Mattis similarly provided guidance in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* that he intended to help “reclaim an era of strategic purpose.”[22]

Assumptionitis undermines useful strategy and strategic thinking. In this article, we identified some of its symptoms, as well as an empirically grounded, interdisciplinary approach we hope can be useful. While there are certainly others that deserve attention, we hope our recognition of these pitfalls can help us build some immunity against the unhealthy long-term effects assumptionitis can wreak on behaviorally realistic, meaningful strategy.

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Maj Gen William F. Mullen, III retired after 34 years as an infantry officer. Among his many assignments, he served 3 tours in Iraq, and as a General Officer, was the President of U.S. Marine Corps University and Commanding General of Education Command. He is also the co-author of Fallujah Redux, which was published in 2014 by the USNI Press. Maj Gen Mullen retired on Oct 1, 2020 and is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Colorado. He also recently started as Professor of Practice at the Naval Postgraduate School (Graduate School of Defense Management).

The views expressed are the authors' alone and do not reflect those of the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Header Image: U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. -- U.S. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis addresses cadets from the Class of 2019 during his visit to the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colo., Nov. 30, 2018. (Joshua Armstrong (<https://www.dvidshub.net/image/4952885/secdef>))

NOTES:

[1] National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016, H. Res. 1735, 114th Cong., 1s sess., *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Part 1 (May 2015): 778.

[2] Herman Kahn and Irwin Mann, *Ten Common Pitfalls*, RM-1937 (Santa Monica, CA: 1957), 24-25.

[3] Gordon and Trainor detail these optimistic assumptions and their implications in Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).

[4] Henry Mintzberg, "Crafting Strategy," *Harvard Business Review* (July 1987), under "Reading the Organization's Mind," <https://hbr.org/1987/07/crafting-strategy> (<https://hbr.org/1987/07/crafting-strategy>). Mintzberg explains, "[S]trategies can *form* as well as be *formulated*. A realized strategy can emerge in response to an evolving situation, or it can be brought about deliberately, through a

process of formulation followed by implementation.” In other words, senior management might issue broad guidelines and control the process of strategy formation but leave the specifics to others lower in the organization. By doing so, management enables strategies to emerge.

[5] Kahneman describes this as confirmation bias, or a deliberate search for data compatible with the beliefs one already holds, as opposed to actively trying to refute them. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 81.

[6] Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations For an Information-Rich World,” in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. M. Greenberger (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 40-41.

[7] Kahn and Mann, *Pitfalls*, 3.

[8] See, for example, Herbert A. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 69, no. 1 (Feb. 1955): 99-118; Herbert A. Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment,” *Psychological Review* 63 (Jan. 1956): 129-138. Simon wanted to replace the assumption of “global rationality” with “rational behavior” corresponding to the access to information and computational capacities organisms, including man, actually possess. Simon, “Behavioral Model,” 99.

[9] Herbert A. Simon, “Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology With Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 79, no. 2 (June 1985): 303.

[10] Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Miami, FL: University Press of the Pacific, 2004); Michael Pillsbury, “The Sixteen Fears: China’s Strategic Psychology,” *Survival* 54, no. 5 (2012): 149-182; James Schlesinger, “Quest for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 1 (1992/1993): 17-28; Nathan Leites, *The Operational Code of the Politburo* (New York: McGraw-Hills Book Company, Inc., 1951).

[11] John Mearsheimer, for example, argues the crisis in the Ukraine is a product of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement and not simply Russian aggression and revanchism. John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2014): 77-89.

[12] “Robert M. Gates – Final West Point Academy Speech,” April 14, 2013, AmericanRhetoric.com, video, 26:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjPeTKS1MQY&t=4s> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjPeTKS1MQY&t=4s>).

[13] Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy.”

[14] Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 21, 80-148. Gates even titled one of the chapters “Waging War on the Pentagon.”

[15] Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy,” under “Reconcile Change and Continuity.”

[16] Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy,” under “Detect Discontinuity.”

[17] Schlesinger, “Quest,” 18.

[18] Schlesinger, 28.

[19] U.S. Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030: Annual Update* (Washington, DC: April 2021), 10. Harold Brown is another former Secretary of Defense who noted the danger of myopia and the importance of a strategic thinking capability to help prevent it. He recalls how he felt bogged down by the “Tyranny of the Inbox” and notes that James Schlesinger and Andrew Marshall’s work “successfully concentrated on long term issues.” Harold Brown and Joyce Winslow, *Star Spangled Security: Applying Lessons Learned Over Six Decades Safeguarding America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 16.

[20] Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy,” under “Manage Stability.”

[21] OxfordReference.com, “Lord Palmerston 1784–1865: British statesman; Prime Minister, 1855–8, 1859–65,” accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130> (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130>).

[22] *Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Senate Armed Services Committee, Written Statement for the Record*, 115th Congress, 2nd Session, April 26, 2018, 3.

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