

**Intelligence analysis and possible intelligence failures.
Qualitative research accomplished on a particular case: news
on the Russian military presence in the Mediterranean.**

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Abstract

Every day we are besieged with news, questions and comments on various themes. Nowadays the quantity of data is not a problem any longer. Therefore assessing priorities in the process of collecting data needs a certain “vision” upon the information which must be searched for and collected. Identifying other factors, which might influence analysis, beyond those which are accounted by the individual, is one step forward in containing errors. Although intelligence failures abound, we lack positive intelligence theories. This qualitative research tries to exhibit how intelligence analysis based on perceptions can be affected and by which factors.

Keywords: intelligence analysis, intelligence, intelligence failures, qualitative research, focus group.

■ Sources of intelligence analysis failures

▪ Richard Heuer¹ highlights both the value and the danger of mental patterns. The author states that analysts build their own version of “reality”, based on information filtered through perceptions. This input is mediated by mental complex processes and might determine what information is retained, how information is organized and what meanings are assigned to that kind of information.

¹ HEUER Jr., Richard J., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, Center for Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999, pp. 10-21 și pp. 116-120.

What people perceive, how readily they perceive something and how they process information upon reception are factors strongly depending on previous experiences, education, cultural values, role requirements and organizational rules as well as the peculiarity of the information/data received.

This act can be compared with the perception/cognition of the world through a lens, which directs, amasses and, therefore, can distort the image. Lenses are known under different names – mental patterns, bias/predilections or analytical assumptions².

▪ The volume *Intelligence analyst's guide, Compendium for junior analysts*³ inventories psychological limits as causes for intelligence failures, namely:

1. Memory vulnerabilities (the inability to save a great deal of information, the tendency to classify information on categories).
2. Cognitive/intellective errors (the image in a mirror, mental inertia, inability to recognize and identify misinformation).
3. Default reasoning (new information blurred by previous ones or by analyst's experiences and beliefs).
4. Inappropriate parities (false similarities between events/ new postures and older ones).
5. Overly positive thinking ("Pollyanna complex") or overly negative thinking ("Cassandra complex").

Pursuant to psychological errors, I briefly need to mention few causes, as they have been identified in *Ars Analytica*⁴: mental pattern, memory, lack of empathy, cognitive laziness, illusion of causality, confirmation bias, category classification prejudice, theory of commitment and reconfirmation.

▪ Other authors highlight failures derived from methodologies: either underdeveloped (which leave analysis rather in an experimental area)⁵

² *Ibid.*

³ MICU, Manuela; VÂLCEANU Corin, *Factori care determină/influențează procesul analitic. Limitele psihologice și erori de analiză*, în Ionel Nițu (coord.), *Ghidul analistului de intelligence, Compendiu pentru*.

⁴ MAIOR, George Cristian; NIȚU, Ionel, *Ars Analytica*, Editura RAO, București, 2013, pp. 295-297.

⁵ JOHNSTON, Rob, *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Washington, 2005.

or overly developed (which may restrict their analysis in terms of limiting the necessary perception/intuition and flair)⁶.

For example, Rob Johnston argues that “intelligence analysis errors are factual errors, resulting from insufficient information or lack thereof. Intelligence failures are due to inaccurate, outdated, inappropriate assumptions or forecasts”⁷.

- The fact is, that based solely on analysts’ individual/cognitive skills, intelligence analysis may fail.

“Analysts’ prejudices have repeatedly limited answers to the information needs of consumers. Thus, from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to the erroneous estimation by the CIA (2002) on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Irak (during the Saddam Hussein regime), the lack of sufficient critical thinking over potential crises, has produced mistakes in the assessment process of information.”⁸

- Some authors emphasize that errors are not so often intelligence generated, but rather coming from the level of on decision making (beneficiaries, politicians).

Richard Betts believes that military disasters befall some states no matter how informed their leaders are, because their capabilities are deficient.⁹

Same author points out that errors may occur due to different perspectives held on same facts, especially when it comes to estimates/predictions.

“There is an axiom that a pessimist sees a glass of water as half empty and an optimist sees it as half full. In this sense, the estimative system is a glass half full. Mistakes can happen in any activity. Particular failures are accorded disproportionate significance if they are considered

⁶ HEUER Jr., Richards J.; PHERSON, Randolph, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, CQPress, Washington D. C., 2011.

⁷ JOHNSTON, Rob, *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Washington, 2005, p. 67.

⁸ NIȚU, Ionel, *Analiza de intelligence. O abordare din perspectiva teoriilor schimbării*, Editura RAO, București, 2012, p. 101.

⁹ BETTS, Richard K., *Analysis, War and Decision. Why intelligence failures are inevitable*, în GILL, Peter; MARRIN, Stephen; PHYTIAN, Mark, *Intelligence theory: Key Questions and Debates*, Taylor and Francis, Studies in intelligence series, 2008, p. 106.

isolation rather than in terms of the general ratio of failures to successes; the record of success is less striking because observers tend not to notice disasters that do not happen.”¹⁰

▪ Finally, other authors emphasize the inability to prevent all risks, due to the “black swan” phenomenon.¹¹

With this background in mind I have tried to accomplish a qualitative social research starting from Richards Heuer’s “lens theory”.¹²

■ Research

In early October 2013, I have conducted a study based on a qualitative research (focus-group), accomplished together with a company specialized in social researches (X), under the coordination of an intelligence analyst and author of several books in the analysis field (Y).

▪ **Context:** News regarding Russian Federation intention to deploy troops and naval military capabilities in the Mediterranean.

▪ **Method used for research:** Conducting focus-groups

▪ **Purpose:** To what extend and by which factors can intelligence analysis be influenced?

▪ **Hypothesis of the research**

The objective we started our research with was to find out to what extent may intelligence analysis (based on perceptions) be influenced and by which factors (beyond those related to the individual)?

We have chosen several students and MA graduates from two universities (humanities major) and we grouped them by six, in three different teams (team 1, 2 and 3).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.107

¹¹ TALEB, Nicolas, *Lebăda neagră. Impactul foarte puțin probabilului*, Editura Curtea Veche, București, 2008.

¹² HEUER Jr., Richard J., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, Center for Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999.

▪ **Intelligence Input**

We selected a story about the deployment of Russian military forces (permanent) in the Mediterranean basin (Hotnews, “Russia wants to relocate a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean”, signed by R.M. on 03/11/2013)¹³.

After a brief search, I identified dozens of articles on the same subject, all published in the same period of time (e. g. Karadeniz Press, 03/17/2013, Vitalie Goncharov, “Russian Navy began preparation for deployment of permanent naval forces in the Mediterranean”)¹⁴

Almost none of the various pieces of news was presented in simple, neuter tones. At a first glance, various authors used same process of building up impressions on comments, in order to support a particular hypothesis.

Most of the columns hinted at Moscow’s intention to restore its area of influence and to Russia’s need to have access to the Mediterranean, as a space of confluence and transit between Asia and the West, between North Africa and Europe. The texts drew similarities between the current state of the art and the Soviet Navy’s deployment of navy forces in the Mediterranean during the Cold War. Other comments suggested that the Western strategic advantage created by the missile shield was thus neutralized, they hinted at the Russian intention to control trade routes between the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean etc. Other comments connected events to the tense developments in Cyprus, the Arab Spring, and the conflict in Syria etc.

Obviously, such pieces of news were the result of subjective interpretations of information. When I started to make my own search on this issue regarding Russian military presence in the Mediterranean, I found out that such news was published regularly for more than a year. So, in fact, the news on Hotnews portal or Karadeniz Press were not at all new, they were resuming (by using, indeed, a recent statement) an older idea. None of the articles (neither written press, as gandul.info¹⁵, nor audio-visual media,

¹³ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-14396958-rusia-vrea-reamplaseze-flota-permanenta-marea-mediterana.htm>, seen on October 2, 2013.

¹⁴ <http://karadeniz-press.ro/kara/rusia-in-permanentizeaza-misiunea-navala-in-marea-mediterana/>, seen on October 2, 2013.

¹⁵ <http://www.gandul.info/international/marina-rusa-a-inceput-sa-lucreze-la-crearea-unei-forte-de-interventie-in-mediterana-10661873>, seen on October 2, 2013.

as [realitatea.net](http://www.realitatea.net)¹⁶ and articles on news agencies such as [mediafax.ro](http://www.mediafax.ro)¹⁷ or specialized sites like [ziare.com](http://www.ziare.com)¹⁸) published during this period, did not report that, in fact, such news appear episodically for over a year. Almost every time, such news was sparked by a declaration of an “official” from Moscow.

Therefore, I wondered whether this too was a case in which one could very well apply Heuer’s theory on the analysts’ bias to interpret/filter reality through their own “lens”, marked not only by their own experiences (influenced by culture/civilization they belong to), but also by their own limitations, prejudices, stereotypes etc.

I also wondered to what extent the context (political, economic, military, etc.) can influence our analytical thinking, causing failures.

With all of the above in mind, I also wondered if – based on Stanley Milgram’s experiments (regarding obedience)¹⁹ – a person with authority/professional legitimacy can change perceptions and opinions of a group of analysts.

In March 2013, the conflict in Syria was not very noted, but disputes over oil reserves in the vicinity of Cyprus (Turkey had already deployed military forces in the area) were highly publicized, and the international context in Middle East seemed to get more and more complicated (Iran’s nuclear agenda, Turkish-Israeli tensions, etc.).

Therefore, multiple meanings can be conceded to the Russian Officer’s statement.

▪ Intelligence analysis’ variables

Thence, I set myself to evaluate how analysis may be influenced, presetting the subject of analysis, namely the news and context described (when, occasionally both the moderator and one of the group members took

¹⁶ http://www.realitatea.net/marina-rusa-lucreaza-la-crearea-unei-forte-de-interventie-in-mediterana_1132571.html, seen on October 2, 2013.

¹⁷ <http://www.mediafax.ro/externe/marina-rusa-a-inceput-sa-lucreze-la-crearea-unei-forte-de-interventie-in-mediterana-10661814>, seen on October 2, 2013.

¹⁸ <http://www.ziare.com/international/siria/rusia-trimite-vase-de-razboi-si-trupe-in-siria-desfasurare-de-forte-ca-pe-vremea-urss-1178374>, seen on October 2, 2013.

¹⁹ <http://www.infopsihologia.ro/2011/12/fenomenul-obedientei/>, seen on October 2, 2013.

a clear position on subject review). The favorable context was the opportunity to appoint focus groups together with specialists whose charisma helped changing the context of the news processed and analyzed.

Consequently, we had two variables (modified news and context) – and I wanted to see if, lest, we will acquire 2 or 3 different conclusions/analysis/evaluations, although the news accrued from a single (real) statement, and the context as well as the mindset are issues that should not excessively effect analysis. Proficient analysts know they have to expel noise when recovering the sound.

However, we have done just that: we embedded noise.

Doubtlessly, our subjects were not intelligence analysts, but students and MA graduates who are, however, familiar with scientific research methodology, have critical attitude and they can (though they are convinced they can) perceive the reality and are convinced they cannot be manipulated.

Therefore, the original story (the one on Hotnews.ro) has been deliberately modified, generating an exaggerative news (item no. 1, Annex 1), some attributes (especially adjectives and complements) have been, where appropriate, strengthened or added to the story.

In the initial news we have removed most of the attributes, obtaining a neuter style of presentation of news, in which adjectives and complements which might indicate a certain subjectivism were avoided as well as the author's conclusions, generating item no.2 (Annex 2).

After an analysis of all the reports published last year, I have made a selection of the stories on the same subject (item no. 3 – representing a selection of about 17 pages in Annex 3).

▪ **Course of research**

1. The team of 6 subjects was asked to interpret Item no.1, after a brief presentation of the context conducted by a moderator.

The mediator brought forward the context in specific terms of Cold War, depicting Russia as USSR successor trying to rebuild its sphere of influence. An increased attention has been attached to the MD (missile defense), suggesting to the subjects that, in fact, notice of deployment of Russian troops in the Mediterranean is meant to limit the strategic advantage created by the placement of missile shield elements in Romania.

The subjects were asked to discuss and then to extract answers to the following questions²⁰:

- a) What is Russian Federation's real purpose?
- b) Is it just a statement, or Russia would send troops to the Mediterranean?
- c) Does this statement have an effect upon Romania?

After only half an hour, subjects concluded, without major differences of opinion (except on answers hierarchy according to the degree of probability).

Answers:

a) Russia wants to recover losses anguished after Cold War; Russia wants to rebuild spheres of influence held by USSR; Russia wants to sabotage/cancel West strategic approaches (Western countries and the U. S.), namely those obtained by NATO expansion.

b) It is a statement that will be implemented.

c) This will cancel the strategic advantage obtained by Romania for hosting U. S. military troops, respectively, by hosting elements of the future missile shield.

Therefore, team no. 1 was prone to take contextual elements foreshadowed by moderator, being clearly influenced by far-fetched news (item no.1).

2. Next team was given the news no. 2 (Item no. 2), without giving prefabricated elements as context, but the events of recent months (Arab Spring, missile shield, tensions in Cyprus and Middle East).

With no context elements preset, team no. 2 – exposed to an extremely clear, but drily news – was extremely difficult to answer the three questions.

The correlation degree of responses was reduced, one of the subjects – who proved certain knowledge of the subject – to some extent, influenced the perception of the whole group.

However, most subjects exhibited their findings, undertaking their own hypothesis and assumptions – mainly pre-set – so that similar responses to team no. 1 have been answered but no implications of alleged missile defense have been evidenced.

²⁰ Same questions in same order have been asked to all 3 teams.

Team no. 2 could not assess the degree of implementation of the statement, so that equal scores have been recorded as follows: is just a statement (threat), respectively, it will be implemented in the future.

Being exposed to an intentionally altered context (as the team no.1 was as well), team no. 2 could not establish a connection between the Russian Officer's deliverance and the decision to host MD elements in Romania.

Answers were as follows:

a) Russian Federation wishes to rebuild the USSR's area of influence; Russian Officer's statement shows Moscow's concern towards NATO approach to its borders; Russia wants to control trade routes crossing the Mediterranean; Russian military troops' intention is to intervene in favor of its allies (Iran, Syria).

b) 50% concluded that is a simple statement, with a purpose to intimidate the other half, thought it would be followed by action from Russian side.

c) The impact on Romania is the same as to the other allied countries (EU/NATO).

3. The most informed team was obviously the third, as it had access to a much larger fund of data and it has not been exposed to altered news or contexts by moderator.

Discussions were the longest, allowing extraction of multiple working hypotheses. Those answers having the highest correlation have been retained and recorded after analysis and validation within the group. Answers were as follows:

a) Recent statements are the continuation of older ones; all indicate a certain fret of Russia; however, such deployment of naval military troops requires large costs; Military troops are not urgently needed, Russia already having quartered military troops in Syrian port Tartus; It might possibly expand its presence in another state area (Cyprus, Libya and Egypt were mostly indicated). Most likely the West intent to intervene in Syria caused Russian statements; Russia wanted to signal not giving up on Syria and supports Assad's regime.

[I find it interesting that Egypt was mentioned, taking into account that the first news regarding possible Russian military deployment in the area, occurred in less than 2 to 3 weeks after our research, that is early November 2013]²¹.

²¹ <http://www.enational.ro/news/rusia-isi-face-baza-navala-in-egipt-348634.html>, seen October 2, 2013.

b) It is a simple statement; it will not be implemented that way; most likely Russia will maintain or increase number of troops in Syria (possible other countries in the region).

c) Inferences for Romania are not others than any EU or NATO member state. The statement has nothing to do with the announcement regarding hosting missile shield on national territory.

Question	Team no.1 – Answers:	Team no.2 – Answers:	Team no.3 – Answers:
What is Russian Federation's real purpose?	Russia wants to recover losses after Cold War; Russia wants to rebuild spheres of influence held by USSR; Russia wants to sabotage/cancel West strategic approaches (Western countries and the U. S.), namely those obtained by NATO expansion.	Russian Federation wishes to rebuild the USSR's area of influence; Russian Officer's statement shows Moscow's concern towards NATO approach to its borders; Russia wants to control trade routes crossing the Mediterranean; Russian military troops' intention is to intervene in favor of its allies (Iran, Syria).	Recent statements are the continuation of older ones; all indicate a certain anxiety; however, such deployment of naval military troops requires large costs; Military troops are not urgently needed, Russia already having quartered military troops in Syrian port Tartus; It might possibly expand its presence in another state area (Cyprus, Libya and Egypt were mostly indicated). Most likely the West intent to intervene in Syria caused Russian statements; Russia wanted to signal not giving up on Syria and supports Assad's regime.
Is it just a statement, or Russia would send troops to the Mediterranean?	It is a statement that will be implemented.	50% concluded that is a simple statement, with a purpose to intimidate the other half thought it would be followed by action from Russian side.	It's a simple statement; it will not be implemented that way; most likely Russia will maintain or increase number of troops in Syria (possible other countries in the region).
Does this deliverance/state ment have an effect upon Romania?	This will cancel the strategic advantage obtained by Romania for hosting U.S. military troops, respectively, by hosting elements of the future missile shield.	The impact on Romania is the same as to the other allied countries (EU/NATO).	Inferences for Romania are not other than any EU/NATO member state. The statement has nothing to do with the announcement regarding hosting missile shield on national territory.

Every day we are exposed to such (altered) news. *The way information is shared/expounded, charisma of the one who shares the information and the way data context is exposed, are parameters/ factors influencing analysis.*

Altering one of the above parameters may forge analysis. How often the way information is exposed does not matter? The more attributes (e.g. adjectives with negative emotional charge), the more tempted we are to evaluate the situation in mainly negative registry.

How often are we not influenced by the personality of the person communicating the information? *If a person is an undisputed leader or has charisma, we tend to give credence to a greater extent, and we doubt a person we do not know or has less credibility.*

How often are we amenable to a context? *A series of negative news will make us value, by contrast, a single positive information. Drawing out from the context, exaggerated presentation of certain contexts may influence analysis of a simple information/data. "Halo" effect is true in analysis as well, and the need to obtain social consensus often leads us to accept what seems to be accepted unanimously by everybody.*

Even though our students and MA graduates were not experienced intelligence analysts, they have shown us, at some level, how analysis errors may happen.

The less experienced, the higher the noise and the lower the ability to extract the clear sound from the great mass of noises – Team no. 1. A more convenient option for us (intellectually) and socially approved will also be more rapidly accepted when it comes of a straight forward news, without any interpretation, but most often we lack accuracy and correctness of analysis.

Moreover, lacking emotional characteristics or attributes, a drily news may generate completely different approaches, polarized – Team no. 2.

The higher level of acknowledgement, expertise, amount of data on a subject and degree of freedom (non-exposure to misinformation, charismatic leaders, etc.), the higher probability to produce objective analysis. Greater interaction between senior analysts tends often to function as a true task force, cooperating and acting synergistically – Team no. 3.

For team no. 3, any attempt to change assumptions or ask new questions, with the purpose to confuse the subjects, were doomed to failure, facing a greater volume of information, the subjects suddenly became experts. Increasing awareness and multiplicity of sources of information gave team no.3 guarantee of certain objectivity of their analytical approach.

Annex 1 – News/Item no. 1

Feared Russian Navy began preparing thoroughly for the deployment of permanent troops to defend Moscow's interest in the Mediterranean, according to the Admiral Viktor Chikov's announcement dated Monday, March 11, 2013, quoted by RIA Novosti. American and Europeans would soon have Russian cruiser carriers and submarines, just like in Cold War times.

We recall that the former Soviet Union maintained a fleet in the Mediterranean from 1967 to 1992. It had the purpose to counteract the U. S. 6th Fleet during Cold War and had 30-50 warships and auxiliaries.

American airbases, including the one in Mihail Kogalniceanu Airport might lose their strategic relevance as Russian ships would neutralize American planes at any time.

“The Minister of Defense has ordered us to form a force to operate permanently in the Mediterranean” said Chirkov. “We have already begun deployment” he added.

Defense Minister, Serghei Shoigu, had said earlier that it was decided to send a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean.

“I believe we have the ability to settle and maintain such a fleet” said Shoigu, who spoke about the recent success major naval maneuvers conducted by the Russians in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Exercises – true Russian military show of force, perhaps in response to the insistence of Americans and Europeans to achieve missile defense – involved ships in the fleet of the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Pacific Ocean.

The two Russians officials did not mention a deadline for deploying new naval forces, which would require significant efforts in terms of logistics.

A senior official in the defense ministry had said in early March for RIA Novosti, the naval forces would consist of 10 warships and auxiliaries from three existing fleets.

The terrible Russian naval deployment may operate in the Mediterranean, using ports of Cyprus, Montenegro, Greece and Syria as supply points, according to sources.

Annex no. 2 – News/Item no. 2

Russian Navy began preparing for the permanent deployment of the naval forces in the Mediterranean, according to the announcement, Monday, March 11, the commander in charge, Admiral Viktor Chirkov, cited by RIA Novosti.

“The defense Ministry has ordered to put together a naval force to operate permanently in the Mediterranean “, said Chirkov. “We have already begun deployment”, he added.

Defense Minister Serghei Shoigu, said earlier that it was decided to form a permanent naval force in the Mediterranean.

“I think we have the ability to form and maintain such a force”, said Shoigu, who spoke about the recent success major naval maneuvers conducted by the Russians in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Exercises involved ships in the fleet of the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Pacific Ocean.

A senior official in the defense ministry had said in early March for RIA Novosti, the naval forces would consist of 10 warships and auxiliaries from three existing fleets.

Annex no. 3 – News/item no. 3

(For space reasons, I will show in here only the headlines presented to Team no. 3)

Russia sends warships to Syria (Monday, November 28, 2011 at 7:37 p.m.)

Russian warships headed to Syria (Saturday, January 7, 2013, at 4:32 p.m.)

Russian warships arrived in Syria - local press (Sunday, January 8, 2012, at 10.02 p.m.)

Russia plays dangerous: sends special anti-terrorist troops in Syria (Tuesday, March 20, 2012, 15:02 p.m.)

Russian naval maneuvers in the coast of Syria. Russian secret service claim that the opposition in Syria is preparing a challenge for Moscow (January 11, 2013, at 07:26 p.m.)

Russian ships bound for the Mediterranean (January 19, 2013, 11.27 a.m.)

Russian navy began preparing for the permanent deployment of naval forces in the Mediterranean (RIA Novosti, March 11, 2013)

Russia wants to relocate a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean (RM, March 11, 2013)

Russian navy began preparing for the permanent location of the naval forces in the Mediterranean Sea (Karadeniz Press, March 17, 2013)

Russia sends warships in the Mediterranean, amid imminent western attack on Syria (August 29, 2013)

Syria: Russia sending warship with a “special load” (Friday, September 6, 2013, at 07.14 p.m.)

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