

Between Intelligence and Intuition

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Abstract:

There is a perpetual search for clarity on the “traditional” use of intuition *vis-à-vis* an increasing dependence on intelligence in the conduct of military operations. This essay argues that in order to achieve a balance between intelligence and intuition, the commander must integrate intelligence into his decision-making cycle, relinquish preconceived ideas and not permit ego to play on his reason. Commanders must remember that there is no perfect intelligence and what appears to be objective intelligence is in fact subjective certainty. The role of intelligence is to aid decision-making, a process where one’s intuition is always required.

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In the field of military studies, there is a perpetual search for clarity on the “traditional” use of intuition *vis-à-vis* an increasing dependence on intelligence in the conduct of military operations. This is inevitable as human societies crave reproducibility in the effects militaries can engender as an instrument of state power. Ultimately, we want to minimize uncertainty in war by deriving a set of principles and behaviour norms that are tangible, at least “satisficing” the needs of states in any circumstances where military power is required.¹ As a corollary, this essay will focus on the military operational context where a commander’s thinking and decisions transcend the tactical level and contribute to the state’s strategic objective via large-scale actions on the battlefield.² The first part will define the meaning and purpose of operational intelligence as well as a commander’s intuition. Subsequently, four subsidiary topics that are pertinent to the discussion will be delineated—avoiding operational paralysis due to confusing or total lack of intelligence; what if the commander’s intuition is irrelevant; what if the commander relies excessively on his intuition and lastly, is objective or complete intelligence possible? Through this discussion, it will be argued that in

order to achieve a balance between intelligence and intuition, the commander must integrate intelligence into his decision-making cycle, relinquish preconceived ideas and not permit ego to play on his reason. At the same time, intuition must not be completely abandoned as intelligence seldom provides a complete picture. A certain reliance on intuition is necessary if one is to decide based on incomplete knowledge.³

What then is operational intelligence? Quite simply, it is up-to-date information about the enemy as well as their own forces that has been processed and distilled by experts from the mass of raw data received.⁴ Its purpose is to assist the commander in reducing the margin of ignorance and risk, thereby optimizing his chosen course of action.⁵ There are several caveats that must be considered. First of all, our discussion within this essay is limited to the use of operational intelligence by commanders. Strategic intelligence is precluded on the assumption that political imperatives can influence its collection and analysis, hence imposing certain restrictions on commanders that are irrelevant to our present discussion.⁶ Secondly, intelligence cannot be

responsible for command decisions but a commander is. His personality, aptitude for risk-taking and his military upbringing are therefore the significant factors in the use of intelligence to aid the conduct of operations.⁷ Finally, modern command, control, communications and intelligence (C4I) systems have revolutionized the art of operations and the nature of command with new and better abilities to plan and communicate in real-time as well as to acquire intelligence. At the very least, a commander is now able to obtain fairly reliable intelligence on his own forces' disposition, a critical capability that eluded those in previous eras.⁸

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Intuition then, according to Clausewitz, refers to “an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light that leads to truth ... the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection.”⁹ By total assimilation of his mind and life experiences, the commander's thought and temperament are combined into a whole greater than its parts. This faculty of *coup d'oeil* can master uncertainty and understand the battlefield. In addition, Clausewitz also emphasized the importance of determination—a



US officer in charge of the Joint Mobile Ashore Support Terminal (JMAST), a self-contained mobile command, control, communications, computer, and intelligence (C4I) center designed to support the naval commander in joint operations

willingness to stay on a consistent course of action and act on belief despite uncertainty—as a catalytic characteristic in an intuitive commander.¹⁰ Contemporary scientific studies on neurological processes yielded surprisingly comparable observations. The human mind works in a fashion analogous to that of a warehouse inventory system. Through constant absorption, comprehension and internalisation of critical information, the brain is able to rely on past experiences and knowledge acquired to combine them in novel ways that lead to greater understanding and new responses for every new situation that arises. This integrated but subconscious process of analysis and intuition is known as creative insight.¹¹ Thus for our purposes, a commander's intuition is the selective projection of past experiences, knowledge and present expectations in various combinations, with the personal commitment to follow through and work out the details along the way.¹²

The battlefield experiences and insights that shaped his thinking as a junior commander will invariably form part of his intuition as a senior decision-maker wielding considerable influence and military power.

Having defined intelligence and intuition, it is timely to explore how to avoid operational paralysis due to the lack of or deluge of intelligence in modern military operations. The solution, according to Clausewitz, is for the commander to apply his intuition to perceive the truth among the multitude of possibilities intelligence would provide.¹³ Given that circumstances vary so frequently and extensively in war, a vast array of factors must be considered by the commander when deciding on a course of action, usually in the light of probabilities alone. As such, Clausewitz advised that commanders should

adopt the Imperative Principle where one should stick to his initial decision and refuse to alter the course of action unless proven decisively wrong by intelligence reports.¹⁴ MacArthur during WWII for instance, persisted in striking at Hansa Bay, the Japanese stronghold without much success until Ultra confirmed the enemy's weakness at Hollandia. Proven wrong by precise intelligence, MacArthur intuitively launched an island-hopping operation that took the Allied forces rapidly to the Japanese Archipelago, bypassing strongholds and attacking weaker defence positions. Five Imperial Japanese Army divisions were annihilated or rendered irrelevant and the Japanese defensive perimeter evaporated.¹⁵ The Pacific Campaign therefore, was an epitome of Clausewitz's evergreen Imperative Principle and the use of intuition to overcome operational paralysis.

Yet intuition is impotent without deliberate calculation. A bold commander would likely create comparatively timid enemies, shifting the burden of uncertainty onto them through surprising courses of action and compensating for his own incomplete understanding of the battlefield. However, even as improved quality and quantity of intelligence provides better resolution of the battlefield these days, the perceived sense of control and understanding could bring about complacency and inadvertently increase the enemy's chances of success through unexpected manoeuvres.¹⁶ A commander must temper his boldness with deliberate risk-benefit calculations. The natural antidote to pure audacity in war would be rationality that produced certain cautiousness in commanders and Clausewitz was quick to differentiate caution from timidity, claiming that the latter resulted from character while the former was a conscious choice by the commander.¹⁷ Thus what seemed to be a paradox was in fact Clausewitz's solution to the problem of operational paralysis on the battlefield—to act boldly on one's intuition tempered by caution.¹⁸

There is also the possibility that a commander's intuition becomes increasingly irrelevant to the fast-changing operational environment the higher he progresses in the military hierarchy. With the advent of modern C4I systems, high-ranking commanders more often than not are positioned at the rear with their headquarters staff. This practice tends to remove these important decision-makers from the front-line both physically and psychologically, thereby causing the commander's intuition to atrophy.¹⁹ Furthermore, the operational environment would have altered significantly between an officer's tour as a platoon leader and a division commander. The battlefield experiences and insights that shaped his thinking as a junior commander will invariably form part of his intuition as a senior decision-maker wielding considerable influence and military power. However, these past experiences may be irrelevant to the battlefield of today.²⁰ These legitimate criticisms notwithstanding, a commander's intuition remains crucial to the conduct of operations and can be augmented by contemporary adaptations. For a start, a commander should cultivate a new type of intuition that relates less to the application of principles of war but more on his appreciation of intelligence. This will include learning more about what the intelligence staff are capable of, how he can select the pertinent pieces of intelligence most efficiently and how he can better task his intelligence staff.²¹ It has also been pointed out earlier that the latest neurological studies have confirmed the potential of one's creative insight where old experiences could be re-adapted to tackle emerging problems. Commanders should therefore search for patterns of similarity and difference with other situations they have lived or learned about actively and apply these intuitively to solve current operational challenges.²²

Boldness must be tempered with deliberate risk-benefit calculations that will insure their plans succeed against a radical and unorthodox enemy.

What if the commander becomes besotted with his intuition to the extent of "situating the appreciation" instead of "appreciating the situation?"²³ For instance, Rommel was so obsessed with capturing Tobruk in late 1941 that he "persuaded" others that the large scale Allied envelopment predicted by his intelligence staff was impossible. Rommel stubbornly rejected evidence gathered by German long-range photographic reconnaissance that revealed British preparations for a major offensive to recapture Cyrenaica. He was to pay a hefty price for his obstinacy and overreliance on intuition in the middle of November that year.²⁴ To inhibit the occurrences of self-intoxication with his own intuition, the intelligence staff must be able to win the trust of their commander. The intelligence chief should acquaint himself with the working habits, character and ambitions of his superior and then make use of this intangible knowledge to enhance the palatability of the intelligence reports, many of which could well be "unpleasant" news to the commander. Field Marshal Montgomery's intelligence advisers, for example, had to develop special "showmanship techniques"—a sort of "Monty language" that would enable them to provide him with accurate intelligence while making it more acceptable to him to authorize the necessary changes in his meticulously prepared operational plans. This entailed presenting advice in such a way as to make the commander think it was his own idea.²⁵ If Rommel had chosen more adroit intelligence officers, he would likely not have been blinded by his own intuition that led to the attack on Tobruk in 1941.

The selection of intelligence officers should be based not only on their professional abilities but also on their strength of character and ethical standards. Men of integrity who would report

without fear or favour should constitute a commander's intelligence staff.²⁶ In this respect, Wellington did rather well in his campaign on the Iberian Peninsula. He had consolidated his lessons from the earlier campaign against Dhoondiah in early 19th century India, which taught him the importance of knowing his enemy well. By 1810, Wellington had established well-resourced staff groupings responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence on the French. His intelligence aides were also trustworthy and Wellington constantly sought their advice in matters relating to the formulation of his operational plans. Implicitly, Wellington had adopted an open-door policy and allowed his staff to report even derogatory intelligence that challenged his operational plans.²⁷ Commanders of our era should take a leaf from the pages of military history and remember the value intelligence aides can bring to the planning room. With a more prolific and trustworthy intelligence staff, overreliance on intuition can be minimized.

Yet having upright intelligence officers who enjoy good rapport with the commander is futile without credible and accurate intelligence, for the latter is the foundation for developing trust between a commander and his intelligence aides. Although Clausewitz claimed that bold intuition tempered with caution is the key to operational success, he did not discredit the use of intelligence, provided it was accurate and reliable. Under such ideal circumstances, bold intuition would be no more relevant to a commander than it is to a chess player choosing whether to sacrifice a chariot or pawn.²⁸ Of course, accurate intelligence was near impossible during Clausewitz's era, but may not be so in ours. As mentioned earlier, technological developments have improved the quality and quantity of intelligence available to commanders so much so that even

mediocre intelligence services are able to provide fairly reliable reports of the enemy's force disposition and order of battle. Stronger intelligence services from more advanced militaries are sometimes even able to discern capabilities as well as intentions.²⁹ Put simply, the pursuit of more accurate and reliable intelligence would be the key to reducing the potential over-reliance on intuition among military commanders.

One can also argue that despite the rapid advancements in modern military technology, the ideal scenario where a commander receives reliable intelligence remains largely elusive. Firstly, it must be recognized that completeness in intelligence requires the collation of many pieces of information and during the time required to achieve perfection, some of these pieces would have ceased to be accurate. The dialectical nature of strategy also meant that commanders on each side would be constantly shaping the operational environment to their own advantage and actions initiated would render imperfect the intelligence, its assessment and the resultant courses of action. Then there is the problem of limited human capacity in collecting and analysing intelligence, aggravated by the current surge of available intelligence. As the volume of intelligence increases, the level of certainty in operations first increases then plunges back to uncertainty. In fact a new kind of uncertainty emerges when the commander is overwhelmed and confused.³⁰ Furthermore, the intrinsic propensity in humans to ingratiate and flatter is incompatible with the production of objective intelligence. In his firsthand account of WWII, Jones recounted how he witnessed commanders being presented only with intelligence that suited their plans and personal ambitions. The presence of a bureaucracy served as a filter that eliminated the sharper criticisms and radical suggestions. Alternatively, intelligence branches would also want to protect their reputation and the resulting reports would either be overly conservative or general.³¹ Having said that, does the lack of perfect

intelligence mean that contemporary commanders are no better off than their predecessors? Bearing in mind that technological advances in the future will further improve the quality and categorisation of intelligence, the value of intelligence, albeit imperfect and subjective, is primarily to provide the commander with more information and awareness of the different possibilities he and his army may find themselves in. Intelligence should not be perceived as a solution to operational decision-making, but rather a tool to aid planning. With persistent efforts in intelligence collection, one could then make a series of predictions of likely scenarios that his adversary might pursue. Even biased intelligence reports could spark off a re-examination of the operational plans under an astute commander.³²

To conclude, this essay has found that contemporary commanders must utilize bold intuition in order to overcome operational paralysis when confronted with uncertainty, especially when intelligence reports are confusing and overwhelming. Concurrently, boldness must be tempered with deliberate risk-benefit calculations that will insure their plans succeed against a radical and unorthodox enemy. Commanders should also maintain the sharp edge of their intuition by developing a keen sense of what intelligence can do to aid their operational planning. In addition, they should draw on their previous knowledge, identify patterns or analogies within new situations related to those experiences and apply their intuition in novel ways to solve the current problems. To prevent an overreliance on one's intuition and attain a better understanding of his operational environment, the commander would do well to foster an intelligence team comprising of individuals selected for their ability to communicate influentially, strength of character, ethical standards and, most importantly, a proven capacity to produce timely and reliable intelligence. A commander should also promote a liberal culture within his headquarters staff so that his intelligence aides would

not hesitate to present intelligence estimates that are detracting against the overall operational plan. Lastly, commanders must always remember that there is no perfect intelligence and what appears to be objective intelligence is in fact subjective certainty. The role of intelligence is to aid decision-making, a process where one's intuition is always required. 🌐

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ENDNOTES

1. Nobel laureate Herbert Simon coined the phrase "satisficing" to describe a decision making process that takes the shortcut of defining what is acceptable and then settling on the first alternative that meets those minimum requirements. See Ong Yulin & Lim Beng Chong, "Decision-Making in a Brigade Command Team: Integrating Theory and Practice," *POINTER* 30, no. 4 (2004): 4.
2. Michael Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," *Intelligence and National Security* 5, no. 2 (1990); 2.
3. Huw Davies, "Intelligence and the Art of Command 1799-1946," *Intelligence and National Security* 22, no. 5 (2007): 592.
4. Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," 1; Davies, "Intelligence and the Art of Command 1799-1946," 590.
5. R. V. Jones, "Intelligence and Command," *Intelligence and National Security* 3: no. 3 (1988), 1.
6. Davies, "Intelligence and the Art of Command 1799-1946," 591.
7. William Duggan, *Coup D'oeil: Strategic Intuition in Army Planning* (Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2005), 3; Michael Handel and John Ferris, "Clausewitz, Intelligence, Uncertainty and the Art of Command in Military Operations," *Intelligence and National Security* 10, no. 1 (1995): 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 48.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
11. Duggan, *Coup D'oeil*, 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 4.
13. John Ferris and Michael I. Handel, "Clausewitz, Intelligence, Uncertainty and the Art of Command in Military Operations," *Intelligence and National Security* 10, no. 1 (1995): 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
15. *Ibid.*, 30.
16. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
17. Davies, "Intelligence and the Art of Command 1799-1946," 592-594.
18. *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington: Department of the Army, 2003), 3.
19. Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," 63-64.
20. Jones, "Intelligence and Command," 288, 292.
21. Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," 20-21; Shlomo Gazit, "Intelligence Estimates and the Decision-Maker," *Intelligence and National Security* 3, no. 3 (1988), 256-6.
22. Duggan, *Coup D'oeil*, 6, 9.
23. Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," 20.
24. Michael Handel, "Leaders and Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 3, no. 3 (1988): 11-2.
25. Handel, "Intelligence and Military Operations," 28-31.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Huw Davies, "The Influence of Intelligence on Wellington's Art of Command," *Intelligence and National Security* 22, no. 5 (2007): 625-626, 633; Gazit, "Intelligence Estimates and the Decision-Maker," 268-269.
28. Ferris and Handel, "Clausewitz, Intelligence, Uncertainty and the Art of Command in Military Operations," 10.
29. *Ibid.*, 48.
30. *Ibid.*, 41-42.
31. Jones, "Intelligence and Command," 291; Harold C. Deutsch, "Commanding Generals and the Uses of Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 3, no. 3 (1988): 198.
32. Davies, "Intelligence and the Art of Command 1799-1946," 594.



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