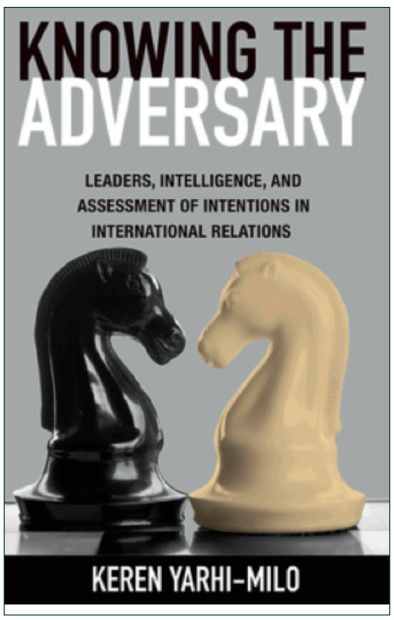
Book Review



Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 2014, 355 pages

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INTRODUCTION

National decision-makers and intelligence officers face the challenge of assessing adversary countries' intentions and policy plans. Assessments are often based on an available body of evidence about the adversary—for example, personal impressions from encounters with key decision-makers, major platform buys and key military movements at the tactical and operational levels. This challenge is compounded by the uncertainty of the adversary's motives and the likelihood of our misinterpretation of these motives.

In this book, Yarhi-Milo studies the process of how states and leaders infer their adversaries' long-term intentions. Three cases are examined: Britain's assessments of Nazi Germany's intentions in the 1930s (Chapters 2 - 4), the Carter administration's assessments of the Soviet Union's intentions (Chapters 5 – 7) and the Reagan administration's assessments of Soviet intentions toward the end of the Cold War (Chapters 8 – 10). Yarhi-Milo observes that decision-makers in government and the intelligence apparatus serving them rarely agree on what credible indicators of adversary intentions are.[1] Often, major theories claim that national decision-makers pay attention to 'costly signals' which involve heavy expenditure of time, monetary or resource effort. These include, for instance, large-scale mobilisations and exercises, the creation of new defence doctrine, the acquisition of new military hardware, or even the withdrawal from treaties.

However, Yarhi-Milo disagrees. She asserts two points. First: when drawing inferences about their adversaries' intentions, intelligence organisations rely

on very different indicators from national decision-makers. The former focuses more on changes in 'costly signals' of changing military capabilities and the latter focuses more on impressions from personal interactions. Second: individual national decision-makers' assessments of adversary intentions are shaped by individual perceptual biases, organisational assumptions and work practices. In this review, my aims are two-fold. I first summarise the main claims which Yarhi-Milo makes in the book and flesh it out with examples. Next, I suggest three implications of Yarhi-Milo's work for bureaucracies and intelligence organisations, in the context of small states.

CLAIM 1: EXISTING THESES FAIL TO SUFFICIENTLY EXPLAIN HOW ADVERSARY INTENTIONS ARE ASSESSED

There are at least two major theses which explain how adversary intentions are assessed by decision-makers. The *Capabilities* thesis argues that decision-makers judge an adversary's intentions from indicators of current military power (e.g. troop strength, numbers of offensive or defensive platforms). Since the building of military capabilities is a deliberate, costly and hard-to-hide affair, a build-up of adversary forces signals more alarming conclusions about its intentions, while a reduction in forces leads to the perception that the adversary's intentions are less hostile.[2]

The *Behaviour* thesis argues that international or domestic behaviours—such as signing or withdrawing from binding international agreements, or increasing or decreasing checks-and-balances placed by domestic institutions and politics on the state—suggest an adversary's aggressive or benign intentions.[3]

Yarhi-Milo observes that these two theses hold that 'costly signals' indicate the adversary's deliberate intentions. Moreover, they assume that theories can offer a rational explanation for how states act.[4] However, the theses suffer from two problems. First, they cannot explain the differences in how national decision-makers and the intelligence community perceive adversary intentions.[5] In Chapter 2, Yarhi-Milo gives the example of the differences in assessments of Germany's intentions by the British politicians and military-intelligence circles from 1934-1936 in the run-up to World War Two (WWII). The *Capabilities* thesis and the *Behaviour* thesis cannot explain the conflicted nature of British political assessments of Germany's intentions. 'Costly signals' of an aggressive posture at the military level—signaled by the withdrawal from the League of Nations and Disarmament Conference, re-militarisation of the Rhineland—were blunted by other 'reassuring' gestures at the political level, such as the signing of a Naval Agreement with Britain in 1935 and its apparent willingness to sign non-aggression treaties with neighbours. What explains British politicians' positive reading of Germany's intentions from 1934-1936, despite obvious 'costly signals' sent by the German military?

Second, the theses over-simplify the differences between individual national decision-makers in evaluating adversary intentions. Chamberlain, Eden and Halifax—three key British decision-makers in the run-up to the war—all derived varying impressions of Germany from their personal interactions with leaders of the German Nazi party and relied on these impressions to assess German intentions.[6] If the *Capabilities* and *Behaviour* theses were true, then given the repeated interactions with key German leaders in the run-up to WWII, the key British decision-makers should have reached largely similar assessments at about the same

time about Germany's intentions. What explains the differences in their initial assessment of German intentions, and the different times at which they came to believe Germany had adopted a hostile stance?

CLAIM 2: THE SELECTIVE ATTENTION THESIS BETTER EXPLAINS HOW DECISION-MAKERS ASSESS ADVERSARY INTENTIONS

The selective attention thesis comprises three hypotheses: the *Vividness* hypothesis, the *Subjective Credibility* hypothesis and the *Organisational Expertise* hypothesis. The first two explain how *individual decision-makers* reason about adversary intentions, while the third explains how organisations (especially intelligence organisations) process information about adversary intentions.

The *Vividness* hypothesis posits that decision-makers rely on information which tend to have emotional interest and feels 'imaginable'.[7] We tend to give more weight to information which creates greater emotional, personal impact on us.[8] For example, information obtained through personal impressions gained from top-level private conversations and interactions with adversary leaders and with this information tested by assessing the consistency of words and actions of adversary leaders during the course of major events. Chapter 9 includes examples of Reagan and Gorbachev's interactions during the 1985 Geneva Summit and throughout 1986 and how impressions formed during close, positive and repeated interactions between the two leaders led to a 'psychological turning point' during dialogues about policies. Although these impressions were not the sole factors determining future policies of the Reagan administration, they were important in paving the way for bilateral dialogue at many other levels.[9]

The *Subjective Credibility* hypothesis posits that decision-makers tend to fall prey to confirmation bias. It is easier and 'cognitively cheaper' for the human mind to ignore what past precedents suggest as credible indicators of intentions and discount contrary evidence, rather than to change one's personal beliefs.[10] For instance, Chapter 6 lays out how Carter, Brzezinski and Vance read differently into indicators of Soviet intentions in the early years of the Carter administration. Brzezinski's aggressive position was partly attributed to his educational background and he was quick to read early signals as 'proof of its (Soviet) malign intentions'. On the other hand, Vance interpreted Soviet actions in the Horn and Afghanistan through his own lens that the Soviets were 'merely opportunistic'. In both cases, their individual beliefs persisted in the face of disconfirming evidence of Soviet actions.

The *Organisational Expertise* hypothesis argues that the organisational interests and practices of a work environment —especially intelligence organisations—invariably direct officers' attention towards certain indicators. These indicators may differ greatly from those which decision-makers use. For instance, intelligence organisations often track (and are experts in) military inventories in order to predict the adversary's intentions, because there is no easy, numbers-based way to predict an adversary's intentions, and because the growth of military inventories involves significant and deliberate effort. On the other hand, national decision-makers are more inclined to draw on their past experiences, current work requirements and expectations, to assess adversary intentions based on impressions formed during personal interactions. As such, the relationship between decision-makers and intelligence makers

can be fraught with challenges, with the former criticising or ignoring intelligence input, or over-relying on alternate sources of information such as impressions from personal interactions.

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

The essence of the book is:

> *'When gauging intentions, decision-makers do not pay equal attention to all costly signals made by their adversaries…rather, they rely on their personal impressions and are influenced by indicators that are consistent with their own theories about how the world operates Intelligence organisations… pay selective attention to those indicators that match their bureaucratic expertise.'*[11]

Yarhi-Milo's thesis presents two advantages over the *Capabilities* and the *Behaviours* thesis:

(1) Her thesis presents a more nuanced description of how leaders and intelligence organisations assess adversary intentions,

(2) Her thesis accounts for divergence in opinion about credible indicators of adversary intentions - *among* the decision-makers, and *between* the decision-makers and the intelligence apparatus serving them.

The three qualitative case-studies chosen examine national administrations' decision-making processes during significant periods of global unease. Two issues limit how applicable her claims are to other cases. Firstly, much of the evidence marshalled includes examples of decision-making in troubled-peace situations which led to negative consequences, attributed to the reason that decision-makers did not pay as much attention to 'costly signals'. Such an approach supports her two stated objectives of demonstrating that existing 'costly-signal' theses fail to predict actual observed behaviour of national decision-makers in comparison to the 'selective attention' thesis, and of explaining the divergence in the assessments by decision-makers and intelligence organisations.

However, it is insufficient to generalise from these claims to the claim that her account presents a *complete* description of how individuals and organisations assess adversary intentions. Rather, her work fills the gaps which theses of 'costly signals' are unable to explain.

This leads to my second point: the case-studies were of large national administrations supported by intelligence organisations of significant size. Her case would be made richer by examining the patterns of decision-making in small states and states with close working relationships between national decision-makers and intelligence organisations. Questions which could be further answered include:

(1) What effect does a smaller, more nimble and networked bureaucracy has on the decisions made by the bureaucracy and the decision-makers it serves?

(2) What do these effects mean for the different types of indicators (costly signals, other behaviours, or personal impressions) which small administrations and intelligence organisations should pay close attention to, when gauging adversary intentions?

CONCLUSION: Lessons For Small States

Many of the claims made by Yarhi-Milo are not new. They have been argued in different forms over the years. However, the presentation of her claims in the form of the *selective attention* thesis is novel. Readers benefit from the clear theoretical framework which show the interplay of psychological factors affecting the indicators of adversary intentions which national decision-makers

pay attention to – as laid out in Chapters 1-2 and 11.

I conclude with some observations from Yarhi-Milo's thesis, which are applicable to a small-state context such as Singapore's.

Firstly, it is important to maintain a multi-faceted approach to examining adversary intentions. It is necessary to attend to capabilities—'costly signals' of military movements and inter-state behaviours—which show the actions which an adversary is physically capable of. Yet, it is also crucial to attend to intentions as disclosed through personal interactions from top-level dialogues and to the lower-levels. This is because the intentions of the political leadership will crank the physical military machinery into action.

A second point follows from this need for a multi-faceted approach: to gauge the reliability of the predicted intentions, it is important to track how intentions (as articulated by leaders) match with the 'costly signals' and track the role that personal experience and bias may play in downplaying the intentions of adversary states. Favourable personal impressions may suggest seemingly friendly intentions (as how Chamberlain assessed Hitler in their initial encounters), but fail to match the 'costly signals' of military movements. It is an imperative for small states to track these trends, given their military vulnerabilities in having little strategic depth and reaction time. In order to achieve maximum early warning, changes of the 'costly signals' of military movements must be flagged at the earliest possible instance, despite apparently benign intentions of adversary leaders.

As such, a third point emerges: given the importance of how past experience confers cognitive filters, biases and assumptions upon decision-makers, it is advantageous for countries to have strong institutional links between national decision-makers and intelligence organisations.

At the systemic level, strong institutional links will bridge the divergence in opinions of national decision-makers and their intelligence apparatus serving them, on what constitute credible indicators of adversary intentions.

ENDNOTES

1. Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations' (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1.
2. Ibid., 29.
3. Ibid., 34.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid., 11.
6. Ibid., 45.
7. Ibid., 3. Richards J. Heuer, Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, *Central Intelligence Agency*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999, 118.
8. Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations', (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 16.
9. Ibid., 198.
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Ibid., 241.