THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

School of History and Politics

RETHINKING THREAT:

INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS, INTENTIONS, CAPABILITIES, AND THE CHALLENGE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

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Abstract

Recommendations for critical examinations of existing analytical approaches have become a consistent feature of the intelligence literature. Many of these are based on the recognition of an increasingly complex security environment in which non-state actors threaten states' citizens. The publication of previously classified information, particularly following successful mass-casualty attacks, provides an opportunity for critically reviewing approaches to intelligence analysis. Within this context, this thesis critiques a foundational approach to intelligence analysis, namely a conceptual model of threat based on the dual-parameters of intentions and capabilities. This conventional approach was publicly described by J. David Singer in his 1958 seminal paper *Threat Perception and the Armament-Tension Dilemma*. Singer describes government and intelligence agencies' perceptions of threat as being based on the parameters of *capability* and *intent*, displaying the relationship as a quasi-mathematical model: *Threat-Perception = Estimated Capability x Estimated Intent*. This thesis demonstrates this approach has been consistently used by governments, intelligence agencies and within the broader intelligence literature over the past five decades, and was already well-established within intelligence agencies long before Singer described the approach. The study also shows that, despite significant changes in the nature and characteristics of threats, this conventional approach to assessing threat has undergone little modification and limited critique. The core argument of this thesis is that the conventional model used by intelligence agencies is too simplistic to capture the nature and complexity of non-state threats. By articulating an ontology, epistemology and methodology of threat and threat assessment, this thesis moves beyond an uncritical acceptance of the conventional model of threat. The study demonstrates how the model of threat, used and reinforced by intelligence agencies within a Cold War context to assess threats from clearly defined states, has become the primary approach to assessing threats from often ill-defined and amorphous non-state actors. The study specifically focuses on intelligence analysis within the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia which have all demonstrated an acceptance and use of the conventional model of threat against both state-based, and most recently, non-state threats. Each of these states suffered mass-casualty attacks against their citizens from non-state actors within a four year period (2001-2005): the September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington; October 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia; and the July 2005 attacks in London. In applying Singer's model to these incidents, the thesis vivifies the analytical challenge of non-state threats in distinct and faceted ways and identifies limitations of the conventional approach when assessing mass-casualty threats from non-state actors.

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