

Behavioral Public Choice and National Security Decision Making

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Fifty years after Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's research into behavioral dimensions of human decision making, scholars are just beginning to explore how that work applies to the formation of public policy and the conduct of international relations and transnational security programs. Behavioral public choice is an emerging theoretical framework for that expanded research. The field brings together economics, psychology, decision science, law, public policy, and other disciplines to consider how decision makers advance the welfare interests of national and global communities. Two focus areas are: 1) the behavioral failures that lead to suboptimal outcomes when individuals and groups face ambiguity/uncertainty (e.g., assessing terrorism risk and deciding among counterterrorism policy options); and 2) institutional design opportunities to mitigate those failures. The Decadal Survey can advance this field and improve the work of analysts, the formulation of policy options, and decisions of national and transnational security officials. It would be a fitting continuation of the thinking about behavioral dimensions of IC missions and challenges that scholar-professionals like Sherman Kent advanced as the IC evolved during World War II and throughout the Cold War.

What are some of the key challenges, questions, and needs regarding social and behavioral developments?

- Analysts and other national security officials need greater ability to assess, quantify, and manage risk in counterterrorism and other security programs where risk is particularly difficult to quantify.
- Analysts and policy makers seek to avoid behavioral failures common in all human decision making (e.g., those attributed to biases and heuristics) to make sound decisions that advance the rule of law and otherwise maximize welfare outcomes.
- Post-9/11 studies of intelligence analysis mandated by Congress do not comprehensively address behavioral failures or multi-government decisions about intelligence analysis and policy.

- A wide range of 21st-century counterterrorism and intelligence issues—including detention, interrogation, use of drones, coalition operations, multi-hatting of U.S. officials, and cyber analysis and operations—present new decision making considerations that should benefit from the latest research across the social and behavioral sciences.
- The President, Director of National Intelligence, other U.S. national security officials, and global security partners face great challenges improving privacy, transparency, and public trust in the conduct of intelligence functions; these governance issues prompt a need for collaborative work to improve government decision making and IC assessments of global threats.

What makes these challenges and questions important at this time and in the foreseeable future?

- Applying behavioral insights and advancing the behavioral public choice field with a focus on security issues can supplement and improve IC reforms and studies that Congress and the President have begun since September 2001.
- Ongoing and anticipated structural reforms of U.S. national security entities—including CIA, NSA, U.S. Cyber Command—can be most effective and efficient if they draw upon insights from this field.
- As populist and nationalist movements continue on multiple continents, advancing common formulations of global welfare interests—through economic analysis, transnational law, professional ethics codes, and other norms—and interrupting cycles of violence may promote stability.

What are the anticipated national security benefits for addressing these challenges and questions?

- Insights from ongoing behavioral science research can improve traditional decision making models—e.g., bureaucratic politics, rational actor—to explain or predict national security decision making at the office, agency, interagency, or transnational level.
- Research in this area can also improve analysts’ work in collaborative teams and help them reach sound decisions, frame findings for policy makers, and help senior officials avoid behavioral failures.

- Behavioral public choice research can improve the decision processes of analysts, case officers, policy officials, and others designing, deliberating, and carrying out counterterrorism and other national security programs.
- If the Decadal Survey focuses on this field it can further IC transparency initiatives and promote research tailored to IC (and broader national security) decision making environments that would not otherwise be undertaken.
- Forming near-term, government-academic research relationships can also generate data to inform IC officials' options to implement ethics principles, transparency principles, and goals that are difficult to implement.

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