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### Article

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Between a Rock and a Hard Place of Geopolitically Sensitive Threats

Abstract

This paper analyses the management of high-profile geopolitically sensitive threats (*verifying potential terrorist identity, hostage rescue and national/international security*). Defining features of such cases include decision makers' ability to prospectively model competing binary (e.g., do/do not use lethal force), categorical (i.e., choosing between options – e.g., ground forces or unmanned weapons system) or ordinal (e.g., level of acceptable collateral damage) future scenarios in which they must select between options and where every outcome looks aversive and high risk (i.e., 'damned if you do or damned if you don't decisions'). A frequent consequence of such prospective calculations is 'decision inertia' (i.e., a failure to execute an important, irrevocable decision resulting in non-optimal consequences), or 'implementation failure' (i.e., a failure to make a choice). This paper provides a theoretical platform from which to view, understand and, most importantly, minimize decision inertia and failures to act. By combining the benefit of the theoretical framework and hindsight knowledge of the analyzed critical incidents, the paper also helps identify past decisional mistakes, areas of improvement, in order to inform live assessment and management of similar geopolitical threats in the future.

*Keywords:* Accountability; Accuracy-effort trade-off; Decision making; Decision inertia; Uncertainty;

### Between a Rock and a Hard Place of Geopolitically Sensitive Threats

Understanding the antecedents of faulty decisions when facing highly complex threats to national security is critical considering the similar debates underway elsewhere on legal use of force against states believed to pose a threat of disastrous attack (Waxman, 2009). For example, the assessment and management of the threat is currently being debated regarding the uranium-enrichment program run by Iran and NATO's corresponding decision inertia; the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq, and the deadlock around direct intervention against ISIS; and the continuing, albeit ethically, legally and socially challenged (Cornwell, 2013), deployment of drones on foreign soil by US Forces. This creates a research gap regarding the dynamic nature of high-stakes strategic decision-making, particularly when facing geopolitical "least-worst" decisions.

The SAFE-T model, developed by van den Heuvel, Alison and Crego (2012a), is based on an extensive evaluation of strategic decision-making literature and detailed analyses of practitioners making decisions in naturalistic environments (Alison et al., 2013). The model proposes that an optimal process-driven decision-making model involves four key phases that facilitate accurate and updated assessments of the situation, and are focused on concurrent learning (van den Heuvel, Alison, & Power, 2012b). The phases include: Situation Assessment (SA), Plan Formulation (F) and Plan Execution (E), followed by an incremental and transitional team learning (T) phase to consolidate learning. During a Situation Assessment phase, decision makers use available intelligence to formulate a working understanding of the current situation, define the parameters of the given problems (Bransford & Stein, 1984) and consider possible ramifications (Endsley, 1995).

Following this, and to ensure that adequate intelligence has been gathered (van den Heuvel et al., 2012a), decision makers enter a Plan Formulation stage, using cognitive resources to refine SA and to develop situational hypotheses based on evaluation of available 'action

strategies' in relation to the current intelligence (Thunholm, 2005). During the Plan Execution phase, plans are turned into action, resources are deployed and, crucially, containment measures can be activated to prevent escalation of the incident (van den Heuvel et al., 2012a; ACPO, 2009). Throughout decision making processes, decision makers must continually reflect on and revise assessments (Eraut, 2000), adapting responses to fit demands of the evolving dynamic and volatile situation, which, in conjunction with feedback from team members (House, Power & Alison, 2013), facilitates Team Learning (van den Heuvel et al., 2012b).

### **Factors influencing 'Least-worst first' Plan Execution**

There are a number of situational factors inherent in high stakes decision-making that affect the ability or motivation to make prompt, effective choices, stalling decision making at various SAFE-T cycle phases, particularly the Plan Execution phase. Both the rational emotional (Anderson's, 2003) and 'SAFE-T' models (van den Heuvel et al., 2012a), identify several factors that can stall decision-making. These include accountability, anticipated regret, culture and history, uncertainty, mutability, effort-accuracy trade-offs and temporality.

Accountability can be defined as the expectation of an individual, group or organization to be evaluated by a salient audience and for either rewards or sanctions to be implemented as a result (Hall et al., 2003). Anticipation of future accountability can influence behavior in the present (Frink & Klimoski, 2004), affecting information gathering and interpretation processes (Situation Assess phase), along with reinforcement and defense of decisions committed when pursuing goals (Plan Formulate and Execute phases) (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). In complex situations, accountability can encourage more information to be taken into consideration without first discerning its relevance, thereby increasing cognitive load (Tetlock & Boettger, 1989). Increased accountability can encourage motivation for self-preservation, detracting

attention away from the task and further inhibiting ability to discriminate between critically relevant and irrelevant information (Waring et al., 2012).

Given that geo-politically sensitive cases are played out in cultural and historical social contexts, such contexts also play a role in decision processes. This might be exemplified by a very cautious approach of the Obama administration to the direct military involvement in president's Bashar Hafez al-Assad's Syria, which was very likely informed by a range of many new threats that emerged in the wake of the invasion of President Saddam Hussein's Iraq and imposition of the no-fly zone in Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Lybia. Historical social-contexts can also have follow-on effects in decision-making by informing the development of analogies that may (or may not) accurately represent the modern state of affairs.

An additional factor that can encourage risk avoidance is a high degree of uncertainty, which is a crucial component governing decision making (van den Heuvel et al., 2012a) and can be defined as a sense of doubt that blocks or delays action (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997). Uncertainty is often discussed in relation to risk (the potential to incur loss) (Molm, Schaefer, & Collett, 2009) due to the influence one can have over the other. It arises as a result of some unknown feature in the state of the world (e.g. knowing how much trust to place in intelligence sources) or being unsure about the consequences of actions (e.g. knowing whether a plan will reduce or increase the terror risk) (Kirschenbaum, 2011). The ability to cope with uncertainty impacts on the quality and timeliness of decisions made (Wickens & Holland, 2000; Fischhoff, 2011; Fischhoff & Kadvany, 2011). Van den Heuvel et al. (2012a) found that high levels of environmental uncertainty in counterterrorism operations could encourage police to become excessively focused on the potentially negative consequences of a decision for being held to account, consequently losing sight of strategic concerns. Accordingly, uncertainty may lead to

accountogenic decisions as decision makers worrying about being 'named and shamed' for unknown, but potentially negative, outcomes (Anderson, 2003).

In risky environments, where outcomes are uncertain and where those making the decisions perceive they are highly accountable, the decision making process can become stalled at the Plan Execution phase of the SAFE-T cycle. Van den Heuvel et al. (2012a) examined this consequence in relation to strategic 'save life' decisions in counter-terrorism simulations and found that decision avoidant strategies such as choice deferral and omission bias resulted. Inappropriate deferral entailed either putting off making a decision or referring the decision to another party. In a particularly uncertain decision environment, the essential decision of whether or not to declare an incident as 'critical' (and therefore bring pertinent organisations' procedures into play) was commonly deferred by participating officers until the last minute (van den Heuvel et al., 2012a).

Mutability, the ability to change the previous circumstances of an event so that the outcome is reversed (Morris & Moore, 2000) can also lead to decision derailment. For example, a hostage situation where the hostage takers are willing to negotiate has high outcome mutability, whereas if hostage takers are intent on making a political point through spectacle and there is little time for a physical intervention, the situation has low outcome mutability. Mutability varies, which makes it easier for people to mentally reverse the outcome for some events over others (Wells & Gavanski, 1989). Human actions are perceived to be more mutable due to being judged as more controllable (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Morris, Moore, & Sim, 1999), and people are more likely to search for alternative outcomes when the actual outcome was unexpected or harmful (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Greater responsibility is attributed to decision makers for highly mutable events because the easier it is to mentally undo the outcome, the more the decision maker is viewed to have been able to prevent it (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). This suggests that

decision makers may experience greater accountability pressure and anticipated regret in situations where the potential for a negative outcome is uncertain but potentially high, along with perceived outcome reversibility. Thus, highly mutable events may contribute toward greater decision avoidance, thereby affecting the execution of plans.

The final factor to be discussed in terms of its potential to derail robust decision strategies is the effort-accuracy trade-off made by decision makers in selecting a course of action (Johnson & Payne, 1985). According to Russo and Doshier (1983), the selection of decision strategies is partly influenced by the accuracy of the strategy and how much effort (total use of cognitive resources) will be needed to complete the task. Payne (1982) notes that two factors can affect the accuracy and effort of different decision strategies: *task* variables, the general characteristics of the problem, such as the number of alternative options available; and *context* variables, the values assigned to different options. This, in effect, represents a qualitative and quantitative distinction. Johnson and Payne (1985) found that the effectiveness of decision strategies is affected by task variables (quantity) whereas effort is affected by context variables (quality). Different strategies are more effective and require more effort in different contexts. Accordingly, a compromise may be made between accuracy and effort when selecting a decision strategy but the more important the decision, the more emphasis may be placed on accuracy over effort (Johnson & Payne, 1985).

### **The present study**

Whilst the SAFE-T model represents an optimal strategy for decision making in complex, dynamic, high risk and high stake environments, there are several factors that may derail this including: accountability, uncertainty, mutability and effort-accuracy trade-off. As is seen above, these factors have the potential to lead to incorrect decisions outcomes and poor threat management. Furthermore, failure to select effective options and to put these into action in a timely manner (the result of both choice deferral and decision inertia) may facilitate the negative

escalation of a situation, which further derails decision processes. This study will demonstrate the applicability of the SAFE-T model by examining a series of strategically complex incidents where binary, categorical and ordinal options were considered.

## METHOD

### Sample

Forty five incidents were identified through open-source searching of reports coming from a variety of American, British and Russian official unclassified online intelligence sources and media reports (including the Independent Police Complaints Commission<sup>1</sup>, the Central Intelligence Agency online library<sup>2</sup>, Yale University Library Slavic and East European Collection<sup>3</sup>, Russian Television website, the Moscow Times, the Independent, the New York Times, Time and the Guardian). All authors evaluated each incidents' geopolitical, historical and media importance. Based on their agreed-upon importance and the three most recurrent types of high-profile geopolitically sensitive threats (*verifying potential terrorist identity, hostage rescue and national/international security*), ten heavily publicized and geo-politically sensitive critical incidents were identified. The characteristics of these 10 incidents relate to three types of strategically complex decision: verifying potential terrorist identity, hostage rescue and national security. Accordingly, analysis relates to a wide range of decisions made in terror threat incidents rather than being restricted to one particular type of decision problem.

## RESULTS

### Identifying the Presence of Derailment Factors

Tables 1, 2 and 3 below provide details of the ten incident reports analyzed along with information on the extent the SAFE-T model was adhered to, mutability of outcomes, factors that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/>

may have derailed decision processes, evidence of choice deferral, trade-offs made between effort and accuracy, and evidence of decision inertia. All reports are based on various high profile geopolitical terror incidents that have occurred over the last fifty years and have been categorized into three types of decisions; establishing potential terrorist identity, hostage rescue or national/international security.

Table 1 displays the results of the analysis for the three reports relating to establishing potential terrorist identity. Case A refers to an incident in which London Metropolitan police misidentified Jean Charles de Menezes as a terror suspect and shot him dead at Stockwell tube station in 2005.<sup>4</sup> Case B refers to a suicide attack against a CIA Forward Operating Base located in Afghanistan in 2009, resulting in the death of seven CIA officers and seriously wounding six others. In both of these incidents, decision making was ineffective due to poor SA and PF. Although plans were executed swiftly and decision inertia was relatively low, the difficulties in assessing of each situation and ability to plan adequately contributed toward disastrous outcomes. Conversely, Case C refers to a raid led by the CIA and US armed forces (Operation Neptune), which resulted in America meeting its desired objective of eliminating the head of the Islamist militant group al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. Unlike the previous two cases, there was a relative absence of time pressure in this incident that allowed the CIA time to conduct thorough SA and PF, and to reduce uncertainty by gathering further confirmatory information. However, the disadvantage of lack of acute time constraint was the potential for decision inertia.

Table 2 displays the results of analysis for the three incident reports concerning decisions made on hostage rescue. Case A refers to an incident in which 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team and a German police officer were taken hostage and eventually killed by a Palestinian

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.ipcc.gov.uk/investigations/jean-charles-de-menezes-stockwell-metropolitan-police-service>

terrorist group, Black September, during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Case B refers to an incident that took place in 2002 in which 850 hostages were held for two and a half days by a group of approximately 40 armed Chechens in a Russian theatre, resulting in Spetsnaz (Special Purpose Forces) releasing noxious gases that killed all 40 attackers along with 130 hostages. Case C refers to an incident in which a school in Beslan, North Ossetia–Alania in Russia, was taken hostage for three days in 2004 by a group of Islamic separatist militants, resulting in Russian security forces storming the building using heavy weapons, the overall result being the death of 331 people (186 of which were children). Common to all these three incidents was extreme difficulty in establishing SA, extreme challenges with regards to multi agency planning and shared operating pictures and lack of effective planning at some point during the chain of events, including failure to accurately assess and manage threats. However, whereas it is possible to imagine that the first two events could have been prevented due to their predictability, the Beslan Siege was far more unpreventable due to the provincial nature of the school and the number of such rural schools in Russia. There were several high stakes involved in the Beslan Siege, including the presence of school children and the knowledge of the disastrous outcome of the previous hostage incident in the Moscow theatre crisis just two years earlier. These may have served to increase accountability pressure leading to decision inertia.

Table 3 displays the results of analysis for the four incident reports relating to decisions made regarding national/international security. Case A refers to one of the largest confrontations during the Cold War in which the Soviet Union and Cuba nearly came into nuclear conflict with the US, but resulted in a peace agreement in 1962. Case B refers to an incident in 1995 in which a rocket launched for research purposes by Norwegian and American scientists entered Russian air space, narrowly avoiding nuclear retaliation from Russia when the rocket was mistaken for a US Navy Trident missile. Case C relates to two controversial suspected Iraqi weapons storage

facilities in Khamisiyah and Muhammadiyat, and decisions around the search for WMD. Case D refers to an Israeli military operation in which six Turkish boats carrying humanitarian aid were boarded for inspection because they broke an Israeli blockade, resulting in the death of nine Turkish nationals who resisted inspection, and a breakdown in relations between Israel and Turkey. Both Cases B and D were subject to time pressure and uncertainty, which hindered the ability to conduct thorough SA, PF and PE. However, in the Norwegian rocket incident, a crisis was avoided because of the high motivation to save lives in combination with the ability to hold off on acting without further confirmation of direct threat to the Russian population. In the case of the Russian Missile Crisis, SA, PF and PE were very thorough due to the motivation for accuracy and saving lives along with the lack of imminent time pressure, which allowed all parties time to seek further information to reduce uncertainty.

As can be seen from this analysis, regardless of the type of decision made in relation to terror threat assessment and management, there are several common derailment factors that can negatively impact decision making; and the presence of these factors ultimately has consequences for the outcome of an incident. There is evidence that when SA, PF and PE are effective (as in Operation Neptune and the Cuban Missile Crisis) and when time pressure is low, this facilitates improved decision making. However, the potential danger may be for decision makers to procrastinate, continuing to seek further information even when this is not forthcoming, which may lead to decision inertia and failure to act in a timely manner. Whilst time pressure may negatively impact on performance, there is evidence that SA, PF and PE can be poor even when acute time pressure is not an issue (as in the Moscow Theatre Hostage Crisis) and that this can negatively impact on ability to assess and manage critical threats. Within these situations, accountability and motivation to protect the image of a home nation can serve as derailment factors.

The results of this first analysis demonstrate the practical and theoretical relevance of applying the SAFE-T model in it demonstrated that there are several types of derailment factors, consistent with SAFE-T model that are common across various terror threat decisions. In order to further elaborate upon in the stages of SAFE-T, a detailed analysis of the search for WMDs in Iraq was provided. This international security incident was chosen for several reasons, firstly, there is ample de-classified reports that can be used to support analysis, secondly, threat assessments of WMDs are a highly relevant consideration for practitioners considering currently unfolding events in both Syria and Iran.

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INSERT TABLES 1, 2 AND 3 HERE  
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## **DISCUSSION**

The goal of our paper was to advance a descriptive phase model of strategic decision making in relation to minimizing and neutralizing terror threats. Adopting an integrated non-laboratory approach, our intention was to highlight the practical and theoretical relevance of applying the SAFE-T model for analyzing key decision processes in high-stake, uncertain situations that involve the search for the least-worst option. To this end, we presented a contextualized way of using the SAFE-T model (van den Heuvel et al., 2012) which could help identify past decisional mistakes, areas of improvement and potentially help inform live assessment and management of similar geopolitical threats in the future.

What the SAFE-T model can offer is an insight-generating platform for a systematic and detailed evaluation of the key factors involved in strategically complex decisions. However, given the limited adequacy of rational choice theories in politics (Schelling, 1993), economics (Kahneman, 2003) and everyday life (Ariely, 2008; Bennis, Medin & Bartels, 2010; Nisbett &

Ross, 1980), the need for future research to expand and refine this model, for example by adding new dimensions and layers of cross-comparisons, is paramount. Such expansion and refinement of the model might also help with the decisional analysis of current and critical threats. This approach may then support current considerations regarding the assessment of the probability and extent of the use of chemical weapons in new conflict zones (e.g., Syria) may be supported by drawing on the exemplified analysis of the threat allegedly posed by the Hussein regime. For example, although the UN states that it has not been possible ‘to determine the precise chemical agents used [in Syria], their delivery systems or the perpetrator’ (2013), a SAFE-T perspective would argue that the ‘effort accuracy trade-off’ of the Obama Administration resulted in the official decision to start shipping arms to Syrian rebels with a view to vetting and training them (Barnes, 2013), but failing to anticipate the rise of ISIS.

Needless to say, and given the enormous challenges posed by ‘real world’ threats, the SAFE-T model is not without its flaws; its current dimensions, for example, may not always be exhaustive enough, potentially posing the risk of constraining front-line tactical decision makers by narrowing their view of available options. Furthermore, given the methodological constraints related to information availability, we did not take into account factors like individual differences, although such differences are likely to be significant, particularly when the executive decision lies with individuals rather than with groups. For example, decision makers with a low tolerance of ambiguity tend to reach judgment more quickly, making decision inertia less likely and increasing the risk of errors than those with a high tolerance for ambiguity who are able to make decisions and take action despite incomplete information, follow through on these decisions, all the while observing and course-correcting even when the exact focus isn't entirely clear in a given moment.

The model may also draw their attention to a schematic set of elements that may vary in their importance, relevance and usefulness from situation to situation, which might marginalize

the unique situational specificity of critical incidents. This, in turn, might hinder creative 'outside-the-box' thinking, limiting the subtlety of generated insights and increasing the risk of errors of commission (i.e., ineffective, counter-effective decisions) and omission (i.e., missed decisional opportunities). Furthermore, it remains to be explored how useful this still under-developed model is in facilitating effective live, rather than post facto, geo-political decision making without the benefit of hindsight knowledge.

Finally, the temporal nature of such dynamic incidents must be considered, specifically with reference to the emergence of decision derailments such as decision inertia. Rapidly unfolding events that have high life-death consequences demand immediate responses. Events such as the 2005 Jean Charles de Menezes Death, the 2002 Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis, and the 2010 Gaza Flotilla Raid evolved in less than 2 1/2 days and all were rated as low or very low in decision inertia. Conversely, the 2012 Operation Neptune and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had a longer time horizon with multiple decision points throughout its course. These incidents were all viewed as high in decision inertia. Decision inertia is therefore correlated with the length of the time horizon. However, this has several significant co-variants that should be considered. Firstly, both the Charles de Mendez, Moscow Theatre Crisis and Gaza Flotilla Raid were undertaken by tactical teams (with strategic command support) and were not the result of foreign policy decisions involving multiple agencies and political parties (as were the Cuban Missile Crisis and Operation Neptune). When considering the emergence of decision-inertia it is therefore critical to consider the temporal nature and the number of stakeholders involved within the decision-making process. This is crucial to ensure that, when analyzing future high-stakes decision making decision inertia is not conflated with the natural time-delay associated with obtaining the required political or bureaucratic approval for a plan of action. Future

considerations of decision inertia may therefore be best served being compared within incidents types (tactical, operational and strategic) rather than across.

This paper forwarded an approach that integrates both exogenous and endogenous factors, while also identifying potential factors that can de-rail the process. Although the SAFE-T model cannot provide tactical and strategic decision makers with ready-made ‘formulas’ for action and the relevance levels of the model’s dimension seem to vary depending on the unique context of geopolitical threats, this research does support that both the SAFE-T decision making process, and the derailment factors identified elsewhere (e.g. van den Heuvel et al., 2012a) do hold both practical and theoretical relevance for high-stakes geopolitical events. Further application of this model may therefore assist in the identification of critical errors, helping to override the traps of decision deferral, derailment and inertia. Further research, which might also evaluate how the model’s parameters relate to one another, is required to determine the conditions under which this model holds along with individual differences in the extent to which various derailment strategies affect decisions.

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Table 1. Three Critical High Stake Decisions on Establishing Potential Terrorist Identity

Incident case	Safe-t model	Outcome mutability	Potential derailment factors	Choice deferral	Effort accuracy trade-off	Decision inertia	Time horizon	Cultural-historical and situational contexts
A - The 2005 Jean Charles de Menezes' Death	<i>Situational assessment:</i> very poor due to severe time constraints. Also there were mistakes in police surveillance procedure that led to a failure to properly identify Menezes early on, leading to a radical response at Stockwell Tube station. For example, the surveillance officers later stated that they were satisfied that they had the correct man, noting that he Menezes had 'Mongolian' eyes. <i>Plan formulation:</i> poor due to severe time constraints (emergency suspected suicide bomber elimination procedure applied in an avoidance-avoidance conflict). <i>Plan execution:</i> very swift, but in hindsight incorrect, resulting in severe accountability repercussions for the shooters and the whole British Police.	High – the ease constructing counterfactual alternatives to stopping the suspected suicide bomber gives his family grounds for legal action, damaging the media-labelled 'over-reactive trigger-happy' Met Police that acted under enormous pressure and very high uncertainty.	Menezes was linked to the CCTV photographs of the bombing suspects from the previous day. When he jumped back on the bus he had just alighted and carried on towards Stockwell, the officers tailing him interpreted the U-turn as an "anti-surveillance" technique. This was compounded by the "awful" reception on the police radios, which hampered communication.	Low - the decision to confirm the suspect's identity was compounded by the enormous pressure to potentially stop him from activating a suspected suicide-bomb vest, leaving little time for any action delay.	High – the situational awareness presented an avoidance-avoidance conflict (one potential innocent life vs. many innocent lives at the tube station). Thus, the accuracy of confirming his identity became secondary. The efforts to neutralize the apparent suspect on the run became a top priority.	Low – very limited time, highest stakes, high uncertainty and situational awareness indicating terrorist activity on the highest level minimized the inertia regarding neutralizing the severe threat he seemed to pose at the time.	Very narrow – the event unfolded very rapidly, leaving the officers very limited time to process all the relevant information.	Whereas normally the Metropolitan Police very rarely use guns and avoid shooting to kill, the aftermath of 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, led to the development of new guidelines for identifying, confronting and dealing peacefully with terrorist suspects (Operation Kratos). For example, the guidelines suggest that the head or lower limbs should be aimed at when a suspected suicide bomber appears to have no intention of surrendering as a hit to the torso may detonate an explosive belt. Also , there is no explicit legal requirement for armed officers to warn a suspect before firing as it may prompt the bomber to detonate his explosives.
B - The 2009 Camp Chapman attack in Afghanistan --	<i>Situational assessment:</i> poor (the agent had always been searched at the gate before). <i>Plan formulation:</i> ad hoc and contrary to the standard security procedures. <i>Plan execution:</i> swift but incorrect, resulting in a major blow to the CIA (7 officers,	Very high – in hindsight searching the agent at the gate appears to have been the only appropriate option.	The fact that another Jordanian was already at the camp and proven trustworthy influenced the decision the let	Medium – the possibility of searching the agent at the gate was in conflict with keeping his trust. The option of frisking him within the compound	Medium – Given the past dealings with the agent, it seemed that a sub-optimal option could be tolerated at that particular time, minimizing his perceived threat and making the trade-off look attractive.	Medium- the agent had already visited the compound before, and subjective expected utility theory might explain letting him in unchecked better than rational	Relatively narrow – the officers had the time to stop and carefully consider the potential benefits and risks of searching the agent.	Al-Balawi, a Jordanian doctor, with a history of supporting violent Islamist causes online was believed to have been turned by Jordanian intelligence (GID) officials into a double agent. When he was invited to Camp Chapman after claiming to have information related to senior al-Qaeda leader

	including the chief of the base, and an officer of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate, died) and forcing the subsequent stricter implementation of more rigid rather than flexible security procedures.		the agent in unchecked.	seemed attractive.		emotional decision model.		Ayman al-Zawahiri, he was not searched because of his perceived value as an infiltrator. Also, he had already provided useful intelligence to the CIA over several weeks of undercover, winning the trust of the GID and the CIA, effectively becoming a triple agent.
C - The 2012 Operation Neptune	<p><i>Situational assessment:</i> great (the compound was under all-inclusive (thermal image) surveillance for months.</p> <p><i>Plan formulation:</i> meticulous with contingency plans at hand, presenting an approach-approach conflict.</p> <p><i>Plan execution:</i> swift with no intelligence shared with the Pakistani authorities, resulting in a resounding success and a major blow to Al Qaeda.</p>	High – the multiple risks of the operation were made salient by the broken and fallen US chopper, as well as the proximity to the distrusted ‘Pakistan’s West Point.’	The detainees’ clues on Bin Laden’s couriers could not be fully verified. The ‘vaccination’ trick to confirm Bin Laden’s identity did not work. The Pakistani intelligence could not be trusted. The helicopters heading for the compound were flying low without appearing on Pakistani radars. One of them failed over the compound and crash landed.	High – the CIA had plenty of time to observe the suspicious compound in Abbottabad to have reasonable confidence that it was Bin Laden’s hideout. They also had plenty of time to consider various strike options before finally deciding to send SEALs. The conflict of engaging someone else than Bin Laden was minimized by the prospect of taking down an apparent senior criminal figure in hiding.	Low – Bin Laden was too valuable a target to miss through half-hearted efforts. Accuracy was imperative.	High – the loss aversion effect (e.g., tipping Bin Laden off) might explain why the decision to raid the compound was avoided for so long.	Wide - the officers had plenty of time to analyse all the relevant information and carefully consider the raid on the compound.	The CIA rented a home in Abbottabad from which a team staked out and observed the compound over several months. The CIA team used informants and other techniques - including a fake vaccination program to capture Bin Laden’s DNA, which failed to confirm his identity. The National Geospatial Intelligence Agency also created three-dimensional renderings of the compound, including schedules describing residential traffic patterns, and assessed the number, height and gender of its residents. In order to critically review the circumstantial evidence and available facts of the Abbottabad compound, the CIA used a process called "red teaming" (using an independent group that challenges an organization to improve its effectiveness).

Table 2. Three Critical High Stake Decisions on Hostage Rescue

Incident case	Safe-t model	Outcome mutability	Potential derailment factors	Choice deferral	Effort accuracy trade-off	Decision inertia	Time horizon	Cultural-historical and situational contexts
A - The 1972 Munich Summer Olympic Crisis	<p><i>Situational assessment:</i> very poor - according to Der Spiegel, the authorities failed to act on a tip-off from a Palestinian informant three weeks before the massacre. Also to help erase memories of the militaristic image of wartime Germany and, specifically, of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, security in the athletes' village was kept lax and athletes often came and went from the Olympic village without presenting proper identification.</p> <p><i>Plan formulation:</i> careful but inaccurate and inherently flawed (the snipers lacked professional training).</p> <p><i>Plan execution:</i> very poor (the original plan was to intercept the hostage takers when they eventually moved from the compound, but this fell through when the interception team was spotted by the BS negotiator . Also the ambush team set up at the airport was only expecting 5 hostages rather than 8. Finally, the under-equipped snipers and unprepared police failed to save anybody from the 11-strong Israeli Olympic Team). Also the police lost the advantage of surprise by botching one attempt to kill the kidnapers who spotted the trap on TV.</p>	Very high – huge gaps in security make the event look entirely preventable. Even when the Olympians were taken hostage, the mistakes by the German authorities are glaring.	The decision to try the final rescue was compounded by a previous foiled attempt to kill the hostage-takers. Also the restrictions in the post-war West German constitution, stopped the army from participating in the attempted rescue. The German snipers did not have radio contact with one another (nor with the German authorities conducting the rescue operation). Their rifles had no telescopic or infrared sights and were inadequate for the distance at which the snipers were trying to shoot.	Medium – there was an apparent conflict between launching a rescue operation, which might have endangered the lives of the Israeli Olympians, and cooperating with the Jew-hating hostage takers (at least to an extent), which also put the Olympians in danger)	Low - great caution was exercised not to harm the hostages and snipers were deployed at several strategic positions.	Medium - the origin of the Olympians and the host country's Nazi past made the risky decision to use force very difficult.	Relatively narrow - given that at all points the hostage takers were giving deadlines before they threatened to kill the hostages, the time pressure was present and the security services did not have the sufficient time to analyse all the relevant information and carefully consider the potential costs and benefits of using force.	The Olympic organizers had asked West German forensic psychologist Georg Sieber to create 26 terrorism scenarios to aid the organizers in planning security. His 'Situation 21' correctly forecasted armed Palestinians invading the Israeli delegation's quarters, killing and taking hostages, and demanding Israel's release of prisoners and an escape plane. However, in order to avoid references to the Third Reich, the security in the Olympic Village was intentionally lax and the organizers decided not to prepare for Situation 21 and the other scenarios. Furthermore, the German authorities ignored a tip-off from a Palestinian informant about a planned 'incident' at the Olympic Games.
B - The 2002 Moscow	<p><i>Situational assessment:</i> very poor (it was clear that the kidnapers were heavily armed and had</p>	High - keeping the gas secret	Even following the chemical attack and the storming, the Russian	Low – there was a high conflict between neutralizing	High – the use of the untested gas resulted in the	Low - given the kidnapers' uncompromising	Narrow – given the threat to the hostages' lives, the	The armed Chechens who claimed allegiance to the Islamist militant separatist movement in Chechnya

Theater Hostage Crisis	bombs, but details were lacking and their exact number (40-50) was unknown. <i>Plan formulation:</i> radical and very risky decision to use a super-powerful knock-out gas. <i>Plan execution:</i> controversial (Out of 850 hostages, 129 were killed by the gas whose chemical composition was not revealed even to the medical emergency teams).	from the medical rescue teams after the raid made the authorities look complicit in the deaths of hostages. – Also, the ease of hostage-taking makes the construal of an alternative outcome easy.	authorities still refused to disclose the full nature of the knock-out gas, hampering the medical efforts to treat the affected hostages. Also, the medical workers were left unprepared as they were expecting to treat victims of explosions and gunfire but not a secret chemical agent.	the uncompromising hostage-takers and putting the hostages in harm's way. The self-presentation of the terrorists as a suicide squad combined with their threat to start killing the hostages before dawn hastened the use of the gas.	deaths of kidnapers and hostages alike.	and unrealistic demands for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya, left little room for decision inertia regarding the use of force. The question was not if, but when the force could be used to save the optimal number of hostages	security services had a relatively limited amount of time to analyse all their available options.	demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya and an end to the Second Chechen War. They ignored the official Kremlin line that 'Russia does not negotiate with terrorists. Russia destroys them'. Cell phone conversations between the hostages trapped in the theatre and their family members revealed that the terrorists had grenades, mines and improvised explosive devices trapped to their bodies. They also threatened to kill 10 hostages for any of their number killed if the security forces intervened.
C - The 2004 Beslan School Hostage Crisis	<i>Situational assessment:</i> poor and similar to that of the Moscow Siege (only later was the exact number of 32 terrorists forcing 1200 adults and children into the school gymnasium known). It was unknown that encircling them on the floor were bombs connected by cables, and that bombs were taped to the walls and suspended from the ceiling. The children were placed along the windows to act as human shields, however, were visible from afar. <i>Plan formulation:</i> very unclear and compounded by high accountability. When 2 rocket grenades were fired from inside the building there was no return fire as the risk of reprisals for the hostages was too great. <i>Pan execution:</i> very poor and chaotic (e.g., armed relatives	Medium – the sheer number of provincial schools in Russia makes it almost impossible to prevent a similar event from happening again. The Booby-trapping of the gymnasium makes it hard to imagine how all the hostages could have been safely rescued. If	Despite the previous experiences of the 2002 Moscow theatre hostage crisis, no fire-fighting equipment was in position and there were few ambulances. Following a (possibly accidental) explosion in the gymnasium, which collapsed the roof and started a massive fire, a chaotic gunfight started between the terrorists and the security cordon consisting of armed policemen and untrained militiamen.	Very Low – the conflict between neutralising the terrorist threat and saving the children's lives was even greater than in the case of Moscow Theatre siege. The unexpected explosion which collapsed the roof increased the uncertainty further, prompting the Russian authorities to respond with force.	Low – the hostages were not just Russians, but children, leaving the option of chemical weapons use and highly controversial Moscow Theatre Siege-like rescue attempt off the table.	Medium – although the kidnapers' demands were very similar to those from the Moscow Theatre Siege, the presence of hundreds of young children made the decision on any rescue attempt extremely difficult and historically unprecedented with the highest accountability repercussions, This was further compounded by the threat to kill 50 hostages for each killed terrorist.	Very narrow - given the threat to the children's lives, the security services had a very limited amount of time to analyse all their available options.	Similarly to the Moscow Theatre siege, the terrorists demanded recognition of the independence of Chechnya at the UN and Russian withdrawal from Chechnya. They also mined the gym and the rest of the building with IEDs, and surrounded it with tripwires, smashing the school's windows to avoid being overwhelmed by a gas agent like their comrades in the Moscow theatre.

	mingled with the troops and ran towards the buildings getting caught in the cross-fire (331 people died, including 186 children, more than 700 were injured)	the untrained militiamen had been kept away, the rescue would have likely been better.						
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Table 3. Three Critical High Stake Decision on National/International Security

Incident case	Safe-t model	Outcome mutability	Potential derailment factors	Choice deferral	Effort accuracy trade-off	Decision inertia	Time horizon	Cultural-historical and situational contexts
A - The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis	<p><i>Situational assessment:</i> very thorough (the development stage and level of threat posed by the several missile sites under construction was carefully evaluated and deemed as advanced).</p> <p><i>Plan formulation:</i> very careful and restraint-oriented blockade of Cuba, presenting an avoidance-avoidance conflict.</p> <p><i>Plan execution:</i> win-win - the American officials promised never to try to invade Cuba and (unofficially) to dismantle all nuclear Jupiter warheads in Turkey and Italy. In exchange, the Soviets abandoned their construction.</p>	Very high – regarded by the vast majority of historians as the first modern moment when the human species became endangered. The situation could have very easily resulted in a global thermo-nuclear war.	Even when on 27 October, a U-2 plane was shot down by a Soviet missile crew (an action that could have resulted in immediate retaliation from the Kennedy crisis cabinet), the negotiations continued.	Very high –the high certainty of mutually-assured destruction led to the postponement of any direct military confrontation. Sticking to ‘defensive avoidance’ (current course of restrained action in the face of grim and riskier alternatives) appeared to be the safest option.	Very low - great caution was exercised not to send a premature signal that the other side might interpret as an all-out assault.	Very high – the unprecedented prospect of a global thermo-nuclear war left Kennedy and Khrushchev with very little room for safe action, except for mutual concessions. The action effect (associating action with more regret than inaction) might also shed some light on their strategies.	Relatively wide – both Washington and Moscow had the sufficient time to analyse all the relevant information and carefully consider all their options.	Following the placement of nuclear missiles in Turkey and Italy, aimed at Moscow, and the failed US attempt to overthrow the Cuban regime, in May 1962 Nikita Khrushchev proposed the idea of deploying Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter any future invasion. During a meeting between Khrushchev and Fidel Castro that July, a secret agreement was reached and construction of several missile sites began in the late summer. This construction was noticed by the Defense Intelligence Agency, secured clear photographic evidence of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missiles on the ground. The USA considered attacking Cuba via air and sea, but decided on a military blockade instead, euphemistically calling it a ‘quarantine.’ During the tense negotiations several Soviet ships attempted to run the blockade, resulting in orders being sent out to US Navy ships to fire warning shots and then open fire.
B - The 1995 Norwegian Rocket Incident	<p><i>Situational assessment:</i> low (the Russian equipment could not tell the suspected Trident missile from a meteorological rocket).</p> <p><i>Plan formulation:</i> no time for any plan – standard nuclear defense procedure was initiated.</p> <p><i>Plan execution:</i> a full alert was passed up through the military chain of command all the way to President Boris Yeltsin who activated his nuclear keys for the first time. In light of an avoidance-avoidance conflict, the</p>	High – the unreliable Russian missile detection systems and its huge nuclear arsenal still make the potential nuclear exchange vivid and current even today.	The Russians should have been notified of the rocket launch. The Americans and Norwegians should have considered the outdated Russian missile detection systems.	High - before the Russians realized the rocket was not a Trident missile, they faced great uncertainty. As its trajectory did not approach any major Russian city, this uncertainty was reduced and the Russians could afford to postpone any	Very low – the final confirmation of the status of the rocket was too critical to allow for any inaccurate judgments.	High – given the ambiguity of the radar signal, the rocket’s trajectory and extremely high stakes, it was far too risky to make a decision on the nuclear retaliation.	Very narrow – there was no time to carefully analyse all the available information and consider all the options.	In contrast to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, this incident had a much shorter build-up and occurred in the post-Cold War era, where many Russians were still very suspicious of the United States and NATO. When a team of Norwegian and American scientists launched a Black Brant XII four-stage sounding rocket with scientific equipment to study the aurora borealis over Svalbard off the north-western coast of Norway on January 25, 1995, it flew on a high northbound trajectory, which included an air corridor that stretches from Minuteman-III nuclear missile silos in North Dakota, all the way to Moscow.

	Russian commanders went into a state of combat readiness and prepared for nuclear retaliation until the rocket started heading away from the Russian airspace.			premature or unwarranted retaliation.				During its flight, the rocket eventually reached an altitude of 1,453 kilometres, resembling a U.S. Navy submarine-launched Trident missile.
C – The 2002 Search for WMDs in Iraq	<i>Situation assessment:</i> low. The UN inspectors were not given enough time to gather the essential intelligence. The data on the storage facilities at Khamisiyah and Muhammadiyat were ambiguous and unclear. <i>Plan formulation:</i> very poor. The ‘Coalition of the Willing’ was not prepared for the spectacular absence of WMDs, let alone the transition of power in Iraq. <i>Plan execution:</i> poor. The invasion led to unsystematic and chaotic searches that did not take any potential insurgency-related problems into account.	High – as the UN weapons inspectors were not given enough time to complete their search and the Hussein regime expressed its willingness to cooperate with them, it appears that the disarmament did not require any military intervention.	The Hussein regime had already gone back on its word and thus its last-minute willingness to cooperate had to be treated with suspicion. The Bush administration was also motivated by the change of power in the region and the Iraqi oil.	Very high – as the Hussein regime did not pose or announce any direct or immediate security threat to its neighbors or to the West, the search for the WMDs could have been more thorough and longer.	High – given the absence of any direct security threat posed by the Hussein regime, the search for the WMDs did not have to involve any invasion at all to determine their presence.	Very high – given the tenuous evidence for the presence of WMDs, which even the key American Nato allies questioned, as well as no direct threat by the Hussein regime, the decision to eliminate the weapons by invasion was fraught with risks and could have been postponed or avoided altogether.	Wide – there was sufficient time to allow the weapons inspectors to finish their job, analyse all the available information and carefully consider all the options.	Saddam Hussein was known for his use of chemical weapons in the 1980s against Iranian and Kurdish civilians during and after the Iran–Iraq War. Also, in the 1980s he pursued an extensive biological weapons program and a nuclear weapons program. After the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, the United Nations located and destroyed large quantities of Iraqi chemical weapons with mixed degrees of Iraqi cooperation. In response to diminishing Iraqi cooperation, the USA called for withdrawal of all UN and IAEA inspectors in 1998, resulting in Operation Desert Fox. During the lead-up to war in March 2003, United Nations weapons inspector, Hans Blix, claimed that Iraq made significant progress toward resolving open issues of disarmament noting the ‘proactive’ but not always ‘immediate’ cooperation, concluding that it would take ‘but months’ to resolve the key remaining disarmament tasks.
D- The 2010 Gaza Flotilla Raid	<i>Situational assessment:</i> very difficult. Given the immediate threat of death posed by the uncooperative and aggressive armed Turkish crew, the Israeli commandos had no time to accurately evaluate the danger they were in. <i>Plan formulation:</i> no time for any plan (emergency self-defense procedure was initiated).	High – alternative ways of stopping the flotilla make the loss of human life appear to have been completely unnecessary.	The raid was very poorly coordinated and executed. For example, when the commandos tried boarding the ship, activists cut the ladders with electric disc saws. When a	Very low – the commandos were under such high pressure to act fast that they probably did not have the time to fully analyse the conflict between protecting themselves and	High – the Israeli commandos under attack had little time to make an accurate self-defense judgment and accurately assess how to respond proportionately. Neutralising the apparent threat became imperative.	Very low – given the threat of death posed by the uncooperative and aggressive armed Turkish crew, the commandos probably could not afford not to use their weapons.	Very narrow – facing the imminent danger to their lives, the Israeli soldiers did not have the sufficient time to carefully evaluate the full situation	The operation (code named <i>Operation Sea Breeze</i> or <i>Operation Sky Winds</i> ) was an attempt to block the Free Gaza Movement's ninth attempt to break the naval blockade imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip. Israel claims that the blockade is necessary to limit Palestinian rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip on its cities and to prevent Hamas from obtaining other weapons. The flotilla was carrying humanitarian aid and construction

	<p><i>Plan execution:</i> nine activists were killed and many were wounded. Ten of the commandos were also wounded, one of them seriously, which was followed by one of the worst diplomatic breakdowns in Israel's history.</p>		<p>rope was dropped from the helicopter onto the ship, the activists seized it and tied it to the deck. They also may have mistaken flash grenades and paintball guns for deadly weapons.</p>	<p>putting the crew in harm's way.</p>			<p>onboard the vessel.</p>	<p>materials- Israel proposed inspecting the cargo at the Port of Ashdod and then delivering non-blockaded goods through land crossings, but this proposal was rejected, leading to a commando raid from speedboats and helicopters. The lessons from the PR disaster seem to have been learned when in March 2014 a Gaza-bound civilian vessel with Iranian surface to surface missiles was raided by much more prepared Israeli commandos who this time proactively avoided putting the civilian crew in harm's way .</p>
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