

White Paper II

# Decision Superiority: Understanding the Impact of Surprise, Denial, and Deception

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Strong, successful, confident nations lack the natural incentive to employ surprise, denial and deception – indeed, these are often dismissed as “weapons of the weak.” In contrast, asymmetric foes, unable to take their opponents head-on, rely on surprise, shock, and psychological dislocation as force multipliers.

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*In war, truth is so precious that it needs to be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies.*

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Winston Churchill

To defeat their adversaries, nations facing asymmetric threats must understand the nature and impact of surprise, as well as their own vulnerabilities. Likewise, surprise and deception are asymmetric advantages such nations forfeit at their own peril.<sup>1</sup>

Three overarching propositions are fundamental to the understanding of this highly complex, multidimensional phenomenon:

1. **Historically, deliberate surprise has always succeeded**, despite the availability of sufficient information to warn of the impending event. This demonstrates the fallacy of the widespread assumption that if only enough intelligence were available, a rational analysis would prevent surprise. Surprise occurs despite advance warning.
2. **Surprise is a means to an end, not an end in itself**. The initiator must learn not only to exploit fully the benefits of surprise, but also to understand its limits in determining final outcomes.
3. **Surprise and deception are the ultimate asymmetric force multipliers**, because they exploit vulnerabilities and capitalize on hubris.

It is also useful to differentiate between two perspectives inherent in any surprise: that of the victim and that of the initiator.

For the initiator, surprise is a process or, more precisely, an outcome of a deliberate, often painstaking effort. It is a plan coming together in a concentrated burst of activity – a plan in which everything worked just right to produce the desired result. Having succeeded with the surprise event, the initiator’s mission is to exploit the initial success in order to achieve the desired political, military, economic, diplomatic, or informational objectives and translate them into enduring strategic effects.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper delves deeper into issues originally raised by the authors in a March 2012 White Paper entitled “Surprise, Deception, Denial, Warning and Decision: Learning the Lessons of History” (<http://asymmetricthreat.net/docs/20120320.pdf>). It also follows up on key themes raised during the May 8, 2012 Asymmetric Threats Symposium held in Washington, D.C. and co-sponsored by the United States Naval Institute, the Center for Security Policy, and CACI International Inc.

Ironically, at times the initiator is too surprised by his initial success to fully capitalize on its impact. This little-known phenomenon – wherein the psychological paralysis and dislocation one intended to inflict on the victim spills over and affects the initiator's own follow-on actions – reflects one of the many dualities inherent in surprise.

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*All warfare is based on deception. Offer the enemy a bait to lure him... Be seen in the West and march out of the East; lure him in the North and strike him in the South. Drive him crazy and bewilder him so that he disperses his forces in confusion.*

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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For the victim, surprise is an event: sudden, stunning, traumatic, and humiliating. Surprise catches the victim at his weakest, exposing and exploiting failings and vulnerabilities. The after-shocks linger on in the victim's memory, shaping and impacting future behavior. Assuming the victim recovers – as is usually

the case – the event precipitates a scramble to find scapegoats, allocate blame, and reorganize "the system" that failed to warn of the impending disaster. It is only then – in the aftermath – that the victim becomes aware of what exactly caught him unaware. In other words, like the mythical owl of Minerva, the victim can see what has happened – when, where, how, and why – only after darkness has fallen.

**Studying the history of surprise, one tends to be less impressed by the initiator's skill than by what appears as the victim's terminal ignorance.** Indeed, the striking thing about surprise is that, in retrospect, it is difficult to understand how the victim could be so blind. This is because indicators of an impending disaster always seem much starker and clearer after the event has occurred. With 20/20 hindsight and without the ambient noise obscuring the signals, surprise would seem easy to anticipate.

In a way, it is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle for the third time: because the individual elements and the overall pattern are familiar, it is easy to pick out the appropriate pieces, in the correct sequence, and fit them into the coherent whole. The task of "connecting the dots" – indeed, even noticing that there are dots out there – is quite simple once one knows what to look for. To avoid the distortion of hindsight – typical of any *ex post facto* analysis – one must place oneself in a participant's shoes and look at the situation through his eyes, as the actual events were unfolding. Understanding the complexities and uncertainties facing both the actor contemplating surprise, as well as its intended victim, helps learn the lessons of history or, at least, avoid repeating past mistakes.

In both war and diplomacy, surprise is a difficult, but eminently worthwhile endeavor. Because it causes both a psychological and physical dislocation of the opponent – catching him unprepared – surprise accords the initiator an obvious advantage. Until the victim recovers, the perpetrator has the initiative at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. In military terms, surprise is a force multiplier, allowing a numerically or technologically inferior force to gain the upper hand – the very definition of asymmetry. Yet while surprise can determine how, where, and when the initial battles will be fought, it rarely determines the strategic outcome.

The issue of warning must also be addressed. It may be considered the interface of intelligence, strategy, operations, and decision-making writ large. At its most basic, warning is information pointing to the emergence of an acute (or potentially acute) threat to a nation's security. That information is obtained and processed by the intelligence community and transmitted to decision-makers for action. Warning, therefore, is the vital link connecting intelligence assessment with countermeasures designed to prepare the nation to face the threat.

Theoretically, warning is the antithesis of surprise – an effective antidote to it. If forewarned means forearmed, warning should avert surprise. By the same token, surprise results from failure to issue and heed the warning. However, according to influential Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”<sup>2</sup> And anticipating an impending disaster might be the most difficult task of all. Conflicts are generally preceded by a period of international friction, signaling mounting hostility.

Likewise, planned military actions usually require extensive preparations that are difficult to conceal. Often, there is an explicit declaration of malign intent – as was the case with al Qaeda declaring war twice – once in 1996 and again in 1998 – on the “Jews and Crusaders.” These were specific and public statements, in contrast to the terrorist group’s surprise attacks on the World Trade Center in both 1993 and on 9/11. Nonetheless, the historic record of anticipating – and preparing for – hostile action is rather dismal.

Suffice it to say that warning time is wasted time, unless action is taken. The inescapable corollary is that the propensity to procrastinate is directly proportional to the time one believes is available. When dealing with a capable adversary, to guess wrong risks failure. **In the final account, it is taking action from the warning that prevents the damage resulting from surprise** – or helps mitigate its aftermath.

All strategic planning is based on a set of assumptions. Surprise occurs when core assumptions prove to be wrong. To succeed, strategies must continually be validated across the *ends, means, ways, risks* framework. In particular, the United States should not assume that future conflicts will resemble the wars in

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*Surprise lies in the psychological sphere and depends on a calculation, far more difficult than in the physical sphere, of the manifold conditions which are likely to affect the will of the opponent ... the unexpected cannot guarantee success. But it guarantees the best chance of success.*

B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*

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Iraq or Afghanistan – lest it lose the ability to project global power, inflict strategic paralysis, deter both nation-states and asymmetric threats, and defend its homeland, its allies, and partners.

History is replete with examples of militaries that failed due to their inability to transform organizations and culture, adopt new operational concepts, or leverage breakthrough technologies. But militaries do not fail by themselves. Failure occurs in the context of an overall, national debacle, caused by systemic problems that fall into three distinct but related categories: **failure to anticipate, failure to learn, and failure to adapt**. In contrast, **victory comes to those who foresee, recognize, and act** on changes in the strategic environment.

For a nation whose security is predicated on an enduring strategy of dissuasion, the most fundamental risk is the failure of deterrence. Deterrence is a function of will (determination), capability, and credibility and, thus, exists in the eye of the beholder. Its success – or failure – is measured only in the breach. To mitigate these risks, the U.S. must retain a modern, secure, and well-trained Joint Force and evolve new operational and highly flexible concepts. In particular, it is necessary to conceive new ways to deal with asymmetric actors who might be deemed “undeterrable” in the traditional, Cold War construct. This is, indeed, a national imperative.

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<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard, Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976)