

What Fast Decisions Depend On: Human Judgment, Organizational Conditions, and Preparation Under Uncertainty

“Behavioral Decision-Making” Workshop, panel on “Decision-Making Under Uncertainty”

National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

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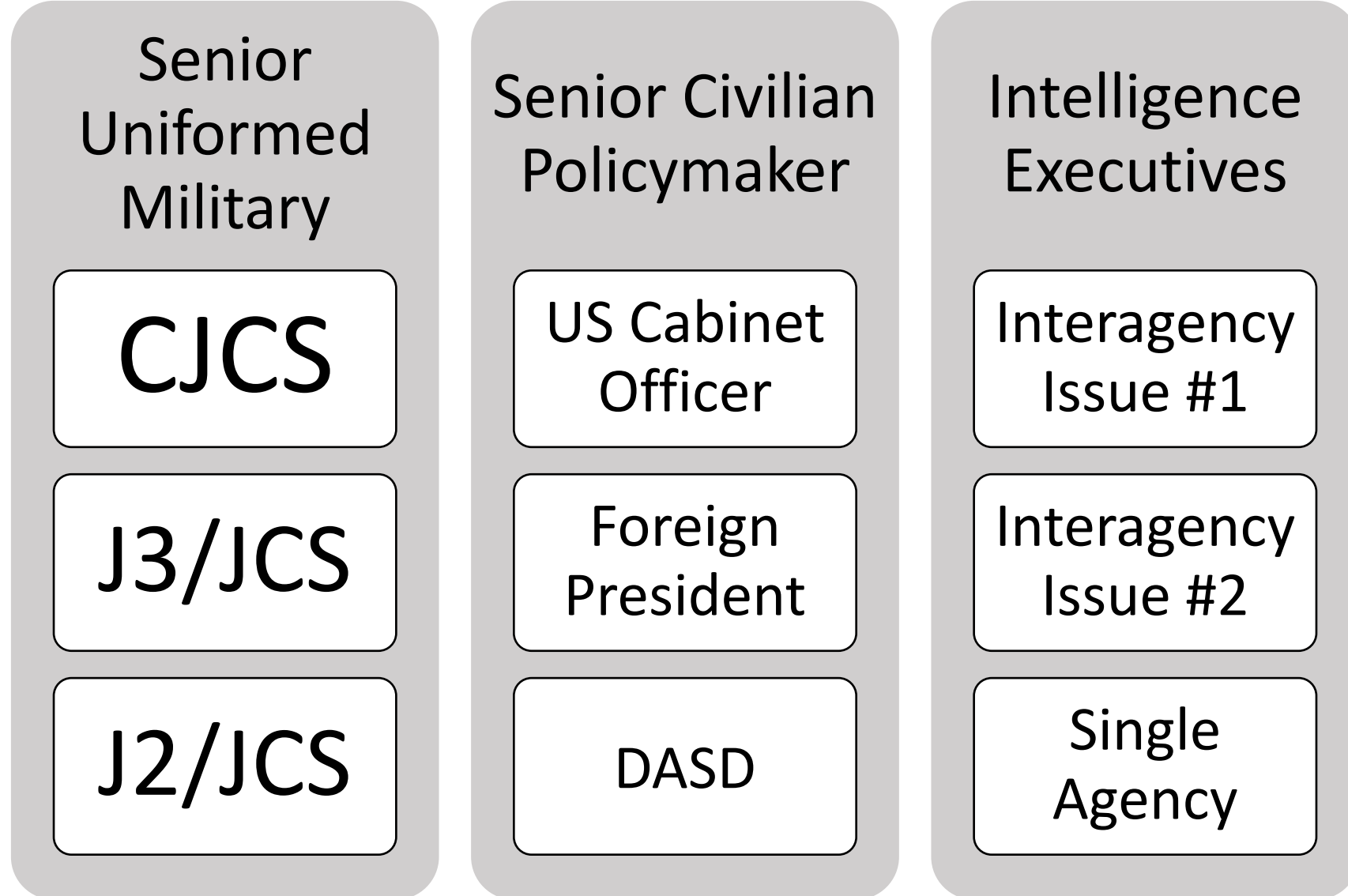
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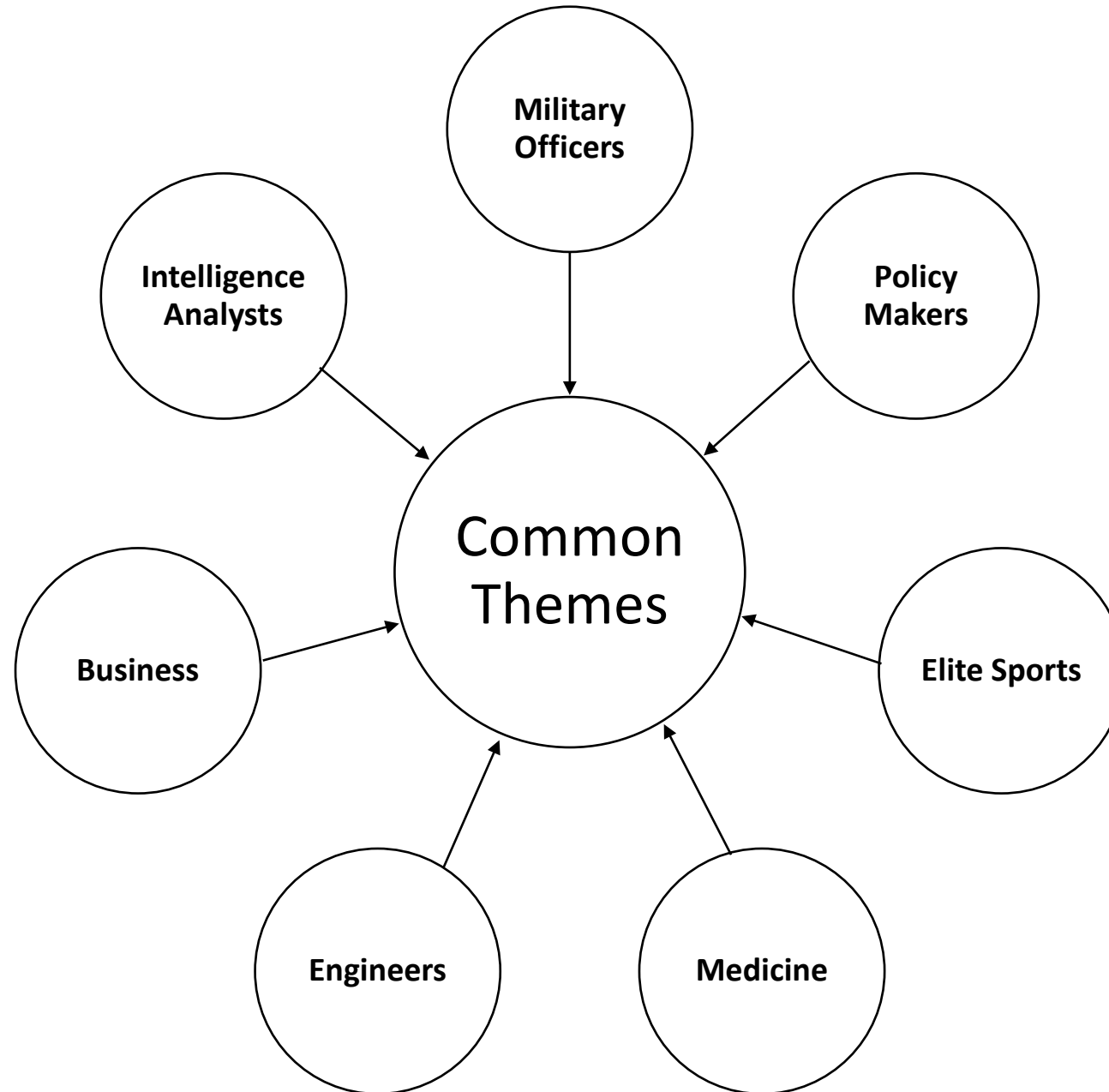
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My Interactions with Decision-Makers Under Uncertainty



Empirical Research on Decision-Making Under Uncertainty



What Decision-Makers Need before the Decision Moment

- **Insight**

- Seeing what is changing, what is important, and what does not fit the known pattern

- **Translation across perspectives**

- Different languages, assumptions, and evidence standards; these need to be integrated fast

- **Decision-awareness**

- Understand the decision-maker's options, constraints, timing, authorities, and consequences

- **Leadership in the age of AI**

- AI may accelerate information flow, but leaders still own framing, judgment, and adaptation

- **Exquisite preparation**

- High-pressure decisions depend on what was practiced, rehearsed, clarified, and trusted

What Decision-Makers Experience during the Decision Moment

How a
decision is
experienced

Emotionally

Cognitively

Specifics
Depend on
Context

Where
a decision is
experienced

Individual

Organization

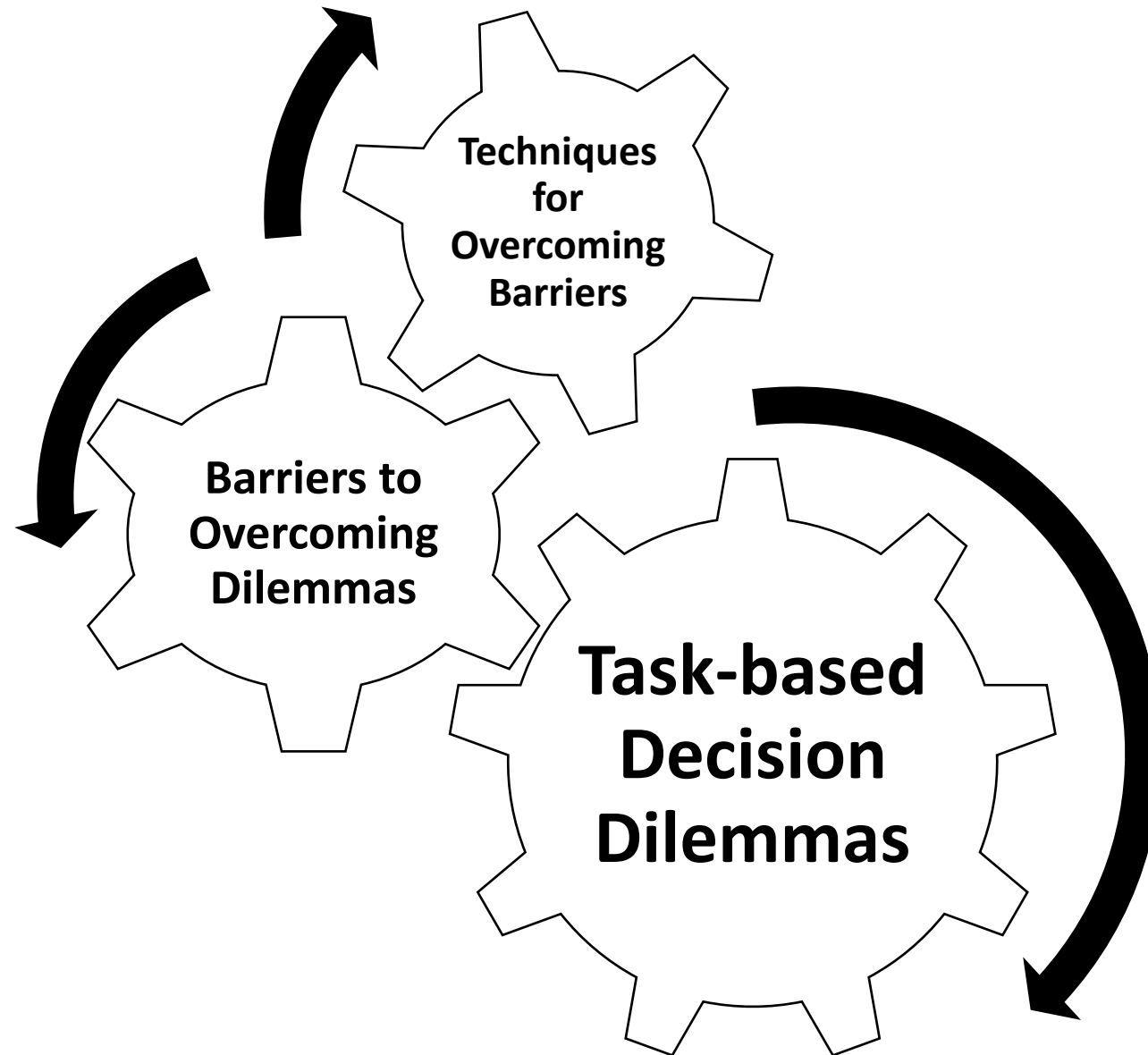
CASE STUDY¹

This case illustrates what happens when decision-makers and decision-support professionals operate inside uncertainty, pressure, novelty, and high-stake consequences

- Who: Foundational Military Intelligence (FMI) analysts
 - A specialized skill set within the imagery analyst career field
- When: During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine
 - A time of great need for assessing the Russian threat
- Why: Help Ukraine's existential survival
 - US and global political and economic impacts

¹ Adrian Wolfberg, (2025). Facing Dilemmas: How Intelligence Analysts Navigate Emotional, Cognitive, and Structural Challenges, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 20(3): 360-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2025.2452841>⁶

CASE STUDY: Decision Process



CASE STUDY: Decision Dilemmas Affect Outcomes

Examples
Should rules be followed?
Should information be perfect?
Should the worst-case be assumed?
Should novelty be downplayed?

CASE STUDY Examples: Sources of Decision Dilemmas

	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE
INDIVIDUAL	Adversaries or Innocents	Knowledge is Power or Discoverability
ORGANIZATIONAL	Deadlines or Quality	Unstructured Sentences or Pull-Down Menu

CASE STUDY Examples: Barriers to Decision Dilemmas

	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE
INDIVIDUAL	One's Psychological Exhaustion	Dealing with Other's Errors
ORGANIZATIONAL	Other's Lack of Appreciation	One's Institutional Behaviors

CASE STUDY Examples: Mitigating Decision Barriers

	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE
INDIVIDUAL	Intrinsic Appreciation of One's Own Mission	One's Success in using Critical Thinking
ORGANIZATIONAL	Proactive Apprenticeship Strengthens Confidence	Opportunity to Seek Expertise

CASE STUDY: Ability to Mitigate Barriers to Decision-Making

Cognitive/Organization

VERY WEAK

Cognitive/Individual

WEAK

Emotional/Organization

STRONG

Emotional/Individual

VERY STRONG

Closing Remarks

Fast decisions are not just about having fast choices available.

- They are the result of:
 - Prior preparation
 - Shared language
 - Emotional regulation
 - Cognitive discipline
 - Organizational support
 - Leadership judgment
- As AI shapes the decision-maker's space, leaders must
 - Remain responsible for framing the situation
 - Questioning the output
 - Integrating human and machine thinking
 - Owning the consequences