

Five questions to ask of any threat assessment

Exarma applies these questions to every assessment before it reaches a decision-maker, its own included. They can be used within an internal team or put to an existing provider. They are consistent with the published analytic standards of the US intelligence community (Intelligence Community Directive 203).

1 What decision does it serve?

An assessment can only be judged against the decision it is meant to inform. It should name that decision, the person who will take it, and the date by which it must be taken. Where these are absent, the reader has no basis for judging whether the assessment is adequate.

2 How likely, and with what confidence?

Likelihood should be expressed in defined terms, such as those of the UK government's Probability Yardstick, so that the writer and the reader attach the same meaning to them. Confidence is a separate judgement about the quality of the evidence and should be stated with its reasons. Undefined words such as "possible" convey very little.

3 What is it based on?

Key judgements should cite their sources and state how reliable each is. A judgement resting on a single source should say so. Circular reporting is a common failure: several outlets repeating one original report can resemble independent confirmation.

4 What is not known?

A sound assessment identifies its intelligence gaps and what would close them. Every assessment rests on incomplete information, so one that records no gaps should be questioned on that point before any other.

5 When does it lapse?

Each judgement should carry a date, the developments that would change it, and the person responsible for revising it. An assessment without these describes the situation at the time of writing and gives no indication of when it ceases to apply.